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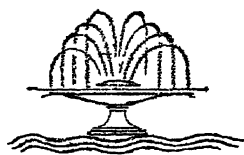
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THE SUN IS MY UNDOING

by
MARGUERITE STEEN



Collins Publishers

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1941

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FOR
WILLIAM NICHOLSON

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Book I
BRISTOL

CHAPTER I

I

*"Hark! hark! the bells, how solemnly they rings
The Funeral Knell of George, the Best of Kings!"*

THUS, in the *Bristol Chronicle*, a local patriot gave rein, both to his poetic and his loyal sentiments; and on October 30th, 1760, the accession of a new George was suitably, if economically, celebrated with festivities that cost the civic authorities the sum in full of one hundred and twenty-nine pounds sterling. This civic frugality (which would probably have gratified the one in whose honour it was exercised) was very much criticized by the younger and more frivolous faction, who, cheated of many of their diversions by the prolongation of the wars, regarded the occasion as one upon which they might legitimately have let off a lot of steam which, war or no war, is a prerogative of the young and hearty.

What need, moreover, had Bristol to economize? The capture of the French plantations in the West Indies had boosted the slave trade sky-high, and Bristol ships had carried nearly one half of the total cargo of sixty thousand negroes accounted for by British vessels in the current year. Transported by gratitude towards their political leaders, to whose guidance were attributed the spectacular successes of the Army in India, America and Germany, the Common Council of Bristol voted one hundred and thirteen pounds for a pair of golden caskets, elegantly chased, in which to enshrine the freedom of the city for presentation to Mr. Pitt and to His Grace the Duke of Newcastle. A hundred and thirteen pounds for a couple of boxes, and a hundred and twenty-nine to celebrate a royal accession; there was felt to be a lack of proportion in the allotment of public funds, which might well have been used to dispel a little of the war-time monotony.

Every one was tired of war news; the first solemn months the arduours of recruiting were forgotten; the dramas of departing troops, of sentimental farewells, even of victorious returns, more or less exhausted. Bristol had spent herself in mourning her dead and in fêting her heroes, and was disposed to rest on her laurels. In the first three years of the war she had equipped and sent to sea more than sixty ships; frankly, the privateers had ceased to pay, there were too many of them, and the French had learned to keep out of their way. There had been the fuss with Holland, which had nearly culminated in another war—caused by the over-zeal of Messrs. Noble, Gordon and others, who, relying on His Majesty's proclamation that he would not suffer French trade to be carried on under other flags, had burned their fingers to the tune of three hundred thousand pounds in the equipment of privateers for the seizure of neutral bottoms carrying French imports: to the annoyance of the Dutch, who insisted upon the restoration of the prizes.

War-making was expensive, and attended by too many tiresome consequences, and Bristol, having given proper evidence of her patriotic spirit,

wished now to have done with it, and turn her attention to home affairs. She illuminated the city for the capture of Quebec and, colloquially speaking, "called it a day." Amateur politicians might continue to grunt and grumble about the alarming increase in the National Debt and the downright folly of fighting France for German ends on the Continent—there was really not so very much to complain about, while trade prospered; while Pitman's new lead-smelting works continued to belch their poisonous fumes across the Hot Wells (to the disgust of fashionable visitors); while Kingsdown was rapidly covering itself with a rash of new suburban residences, to which the more well-to-do of the swiftly increasing population were transferring themselves and their families from the toxic airs of the old city; while enterprising individuals, with the welfare of the town at heart, pressed for the increase of shipping accommodation, for the reconstruction of the dangerous old bridge that strangled communication between districts north and south of the Avon, and for the reconditioning of the turnpike roads, whose deplorable state in winter formed a serious barrier between Bristol and the outside world.

II

The manner of Hercules Flood's death made a scandal which eclipsed every other scandal that, during the long, candlelit evenings of Bristol winter, disturbed drawing-rooms and kept business lively in taverns. The light-tongued Miss Orabella Burmester is reported to have said that, in providing them with gossip for a lifetime, old Mr. Flood had put the crowning touch to his many acts of public beneficence; later, when it appeared that the affairs of her own house were involved, she disavowed this spirited but unbecoming sentiment.

It was a scandal that lasted for a hundred years, that influenced the actions of people who had never heard of it, and sent a (for those days) prodigious fortune rolling about the globe, with destruction—and sometimes prosperity—in its wake. It ruined some famous reputations, it started litigation which was only brought to a close by the untimely death of the principal litigant. It enriched a rogue, impoverished a virtuous family and lost a girl her lover—which might or might not be accounted a good thing, according to how you follow this history. It groaned in the timbers of a slave-trader's snow, it blazed on a mulattress's bosom, it fumed in incense to Mozarabic vaultings; it hummed across the high seas, it rustled in secret chambers, it was mumbled across council tables—and it is popularly supposed to have killed Jason Flood, who, when the tidings came, was at the height of his peroration: that a traffic "so foul, so detestable, so inhuman in all its principles and nature as the slave trade stands fully proved to be, must be utterly abolished for ever."

In all the town's history, there is no parallel for the events of that night: when rumours flew like arrows from the Bishop's Park to Cathay, bringing all the sleepy populace of Temple Backs, Corn Street, Wine Street and Red-cross tumbling out upon the cobbles—a fine harvest for the pickpockets who profited by the darkness and confusion to line their own. The rain slashed down, extinguishing all but a few of the dim street lamps—which spared some curious revelations and saved a reputation or two: though the fact of

the silk-mercier's wife being discovered in odd juxtaposition with the apprentice would hardly have raised a comment that night, save from the most indefatigable gossips.

Hercules Flood was dead. As a mere fact it was not remarkable; he had reached his threescore years and ten, and had been a sick man for a year. But there were tales about the manner of his dying. . . . There was a rush of apprentices to the Flood timberyards, where the agitated nightwatchmen could tell them nothing; the mayor and the sheriffs were knocked up; there was even hammering on Doctor Squire's door in the Cathedral precincts—why, nobody knows, for Hercules had patronized the Cathedral only on occasions of civic state, being a hereditary Pillar of St. Mary Redcliff, in which parish he and most of his family were born. A procession of the more persistent set out, despite the downpour, for the Flood mansion on Brandon Hill. These, later, had tales to tell, of coaches being driven hell-for-leather through the night—of which, according to several, one was Lawyer Shergill's; but when they reached the gates there were men with guns to receive them.

Next day the rumours had increased in volume. A woman in the Pithay had been seized with labour pains, and the doctor summoned. It was dawn before he arrived, and, on the midwife's evidence, his demeanour was singular; he smelled strongly of spirits, his clothes were in disorder, and there were splashes of blood on his small-clothes. Though known as a skilled accoucheur, he bungled his job so badly that the woman died. The tale went round, and was presently accepted as fact, that the doctor had come straight from Brandon Hill to his unfortunate case, which was straightway linked into the mystery which occupied every one's mind.

Wives, questioning their husbands, were sharply snubbed, or fobbed off with placatory inventions that made small impression on the astute feminine wit. Cronies of Hercules got together, cocked apprehensive eyebrows, suspected each other of knowledge meanly withheld—though every one knew that, since the beginning of Hercules' illness, none of his friends had had access to him—and questioned the motive of young Matthew's return: reviving a scandal much current in Bristol at the time, of the latter's dismissal from the family firm. A slight and, at that moment, seemingly irrelevant sensation was caused by the report of a cockfight, in which had perished a famous Brassywing, the doyen of the local Sod: but inquirers in Back Street, Redcliff, Temple and the Pithay were denied knowledge of any such affair. The Brassywing had vanished from his pen; that was all; but it agitated the "fancy" as much as the greater tragedy.

By noon, the whole town had it that Hercules had been murdered: having arrived at this conclusion from sheer impatience and defeated curiosity. An indefatigable stream of callers at Jason's house in Queen Square reported no reply to their knockings, though scared-looking domestics, mopping and mowing at closed windows, revealed that the place was not deserted. It later appeared that Ann Flood, determined to stop the spate of their chatter until she herself returned to control it, had locked them in. Some ingenious soul hit on the idea of organizing a man-hunt for Hercules' negro, Africa, who doubtless held the key to the mystery, but he had vanished, as though into air.

Urged thereto by his wife, the mayor paid a personal call on Clay, the Floods' family lawyer, and found that worthy haughty, disgruntled and as

mystified as the rest. He had received no communication from the family. He had tried to establish contact with Doctor Fordyce, but, for some reason, the latter refused to receive him. Yes, he had heard about the woman in the Pithay. Yes, naturally, the late Mr. Flood's affairs were in perfect order. "And our friend Jason much to be congratulated?" insinuated the mayor, to be reminded, by a cold lift of the eyebrows, that it was none of his business. It was the mayor's business, all the same; he and Hercules had shared interests which were likely to suffer, under the new disposition of finances.

Meanwhile gossip raged along the open-fronted shops and in Hannah James's hat-parlour in High Street. Though places of business were crowded, little trade was done—a matter which Hercules himself would have deplored. Aboard the *Virgin Queen*, in Seamill, being lime-packed for teredo, there was stark confusion; she was already chartered for Guinea, and her trading cargo, delivered at the dock-side, remained sheeted against the elements, while officials disputed the responsibility for transferring it to the hold. The whores of Christmas Steps suddenly and startlingly contributed to the sensation by appearing in black favours—not, let it be said, in mourning for a profitable client, but in token of respect to a magistrate who (possibly in memory of past indiscretions) had always shown a charitable leniency towards their activities; and the little virgins of the Red Maids' school snivelled for a patron whose largesse of goodies endeared him more to their recipients than the tracts and improving pamphlets distributed by other visitors to the institution.

Seven little boys at the Redcliff Grammar received a whacking for their premature presentation of a petition that they might be accorded a holiday to attend the funeral of a distinguished former scholar. In the courtyard of the Merchant Adventurers' almshouses, old tars and old women who hated each other made temporary armistice to discuss the affair. No good was to be had of clerks or apprentices. The only tradesfolk who flourished were the publicans, who had to work at double speed to keep pace with the thirst gossip engenders. A few enterprising if cold-blooded creditors hastily compiled their accounts—but Bristol, as a whole, was too shaken to do more than lift its hands and pray for enlightenment.

It came, before dusk had fallen—in form like a lightning shaft that drove deep into the foundations of civic propriety. Hercules Flood, founder and owner of the timber company which, in the fashion of most prosperous provincial businesses in those days, had extended its activities to Thames-side, and its reputation throughout the shipbuilding trade of England: notable contributor, no less in his private than his public life, to the fame and dignity of his city: pillar of commercial probity, distinguished officer of the society of Merchant Adventurers, shipowner, alderman, magistrate, sheriff, some time churchwarden: benefactor of the poor and terror of local miscreants: celebrated patron, not only of more serious exploits, but of the Ring, the Sod and all sportsmanlike activities of the district: last but not least, father of the distinguished light of Methodism and eminent man of affairs, Mr. Jason Flood—had died of a stroke, at the height of a drunken orgy whose descriptions, as time wore on and invention surpassed itself, transcended the utmost bounds of human possibility.

For us, the bare facts—presently to be related—are fantastic enough. There were, mercifully, few witnesses of the scene when Jason, thrusting open

the door of his father's chamber, was confronted by a figure in blood-dabbled shirt-sleeves and breeches, that, resting its hands upon its hips, looked down from its immense height to observe ironically:

"You're too late, little man. Between us, we've finished Grandfather."

And, on the tail of this shocking speech, as though to complete the collapse of Jason, who stood there, clutching his throat, with eyes and mouth agape in horror at the lamentable scene—a dark, winged object, darting at his legs to stab them, rushed through with a velocity that nearly brought him to the ground. Ann Flood's scream echoed in the stair-well, as, looking upwards, she beheld the hurtling swoop from the banisters of a huge black cock, that crashed earthward with a rattle of clipped, impotent wings. From the depths sounded a trumpet-blast whose echoes, mingling with her nephew's diabolical laughter, suggested that the Powers of darkness had taken possession of the house.

"Come up, aunt!" called Matthew, over the banister. "It's only old Nergal—and, by the look of things, my uncle needs your aid. Look to the living, aunt—the living before the dead!"

III

The audience, mainly feminine, rustled its silks and agitated its bonnets. There was great competition in bonnets; a large number of their wearers, had they realized that the guineas that slipped so nimbly into Mrs. Hannah James's till came from their husbands' private flutterings in the slave trade, might have suffered some diminishment of humane indignation. An abstract pity, lent substance by financial support, is all very well, and vastly becoming to the fair sex, much of whose charm is said to rest upon its sensibility; but when it touches the grave question of personal adornment——!

Here and there a serious, attentive face was riveted upon the speaker; Miss Orabella Burmester, vinaigrette held to her nose, was on the point of whispering her hope that Mr. Jason would not harrow them too unconscionably, when she was checked by the utter gravity and stillness of her sister's profile. A pity so lovely a creature should take these matters so much to heart. Pally was far too beautiful to be serious.

Miss Orabella herself was there under protest. Of course these anti-slavery lectures were all the rage, and when they were sponsored by so influential a family as the Floods, you just *had* to attend them, for the sake of your social credit. And there was Lady Gannet, professing to swoon, and being supported by her maid—and all the world knew she had got the most enchanting little black boy, called Absalom, for whom she had paid ten pounds, and who was as entertaining as a monkey! Miss Orabella, leaning back on her form, sighed deeply, reflecting that, if her father were as rich as Amelia Flood's, she would die before appearing in that dowdy, old-fashioned saracenet, at which Betty the housemaid would turn up her nose in disdain. Poor Miss Flood! It was a calamity to have religion in the family. Avoiding her sister's eyes, Miss Orabella lifted her muff, to conceal a yawn.

Apart from sincerity, Jason Flood had few of the qualities of the public speaker. He was a small, mean-looking man, whose customary air of fretful

consequence alone served to remind people that by patronymic and social standing he was a person of importance.

The Reverend George Whitefield had had a great success with Jason, during his 1737 mission, and the cause of Methodism was considered to have received a notable impetus when it included a Flood among its converts.

He and his family—wife and two pinched-looking daughters—made a drab little group on the platform. Jason had a cold in his head, and his voice, in consequence, was more than ever thin and reedy: a misfortune for which his well-trained supporters did their best to make up by the sobs and cries and semi-swoons which helped to stimulate the more lethargic emotions of the audience.

"O, my brethren in the Lord!" Jason was sniffing, through the kerchief he had just drawn from the pocket of the old-fashioned, lamp-shade-skirted coat he still affected, in distinction to the sleek cut-aways favoured by the majority of his contemporaries, "there is no species of vice, injustice or imposition, however foul or gross, to which this infernal trade has not given birth!" The unctuous description towards which he was proceeding was postponed by a volley of sneezes, in the midst of which some irreverent person tittered, and a hand touched Miss Orabella's shoulder from behind.

"Have a comfit!" came an urgent whisper. "Goodness, Orabella, do you think he will ever stop? And I'm bubbling over with the news! Don't tell me you've already heard, you sagacious creature——!"

"Heard what? I've heard nothing——"

"Oh, really, I'm enchanted! To have got in first is indeed a triumph where my dearest Orabella is concerned." A perfumed titter made Orabella draw slightly away; she disliked other women's perfumes. "Of course you've perceived that, apart from Mr. Jason's shockin' cold, the Floods are in *mauvaise mine* to-night? And little wonder! Matthew's returned."

"What!" cried Miss Orabella, so sharp and clear that every head in the vicinity jerked in her direction.

"Hush, Orry." Her sister's slim, gloved hand came over Orabella's, which clutched and prevented its return to its owner's lap.

"Pally! Did you hear? Matthew Flood's come back."

Pallas Burmester said nothing, but, beneath the veil of India gauze that mercifully shadowed the brim of her beaver hat, the colour first drained from her face, leaving it so pale that Orabella, horrified, thrust the vinaigrette under her sister's nose, then returned like a flame, a quivering brightness that resembled the kindling of a lamp within a globe of alabaster.

"Pally—for mercy's sake——!"

Jason had got into his stride again, but, despite his efforts, and the loyal support of his family, the audience was not responding in its usual fashion. It is curious how a nucleus of inattention, however small, can radiate its influence in such a manner as to affect a whole assembly. The two Miss Burmesters and their friend, discreet as was their behaviour, formed all unwittingly this nucleus of an emotion too powerful for Jason's subject to counteract. Torn by their private feelings, they sat, politely unmoved, through a horrific description of negro torture which, somehow, missed its effect. The comfortable housewives of Bristol stared dumbly at the Misses Flood, as they whooped and sobbed and clutched at their mother, who alone seemed overcome

by these hideous revelations. At the same moment, they became aware of some active element of disturbance at the back of the hall.

Mortified, the speaker paused, to frown at his wife. Ann Flood, making a remarkable recovery, pushed her daughters aside and, taller, thinner, more commanding than her husband, came to the edge of the platform, like a school teacher determined to stand for no more nonsense among the scholars. Sharply she clapped her hands.

"Good people, pray attend!"

But now all the ribbon loops and coloured feathers in the well-dressed front rows were turning and twisting, as curiosity conquered good manners; and out of the little knot of townsfolk whom lack of entertainment and a wet night had brought in, to swell the serious audience, broke a figure whose appearance first flushed with annoyance Jason's acidulous countenance, then blanched it with a nameless apprehension.

There were few who could not identify the tall negro who trotted beside the coach in which Hercules Flood took his rare airings about the town. Sleek, well-fed and prosperous, he was the worst possible argument for Jason's dissertation on the abuse of slaves at the hands of their white masters; for that reason alone, his presence was unwelcome. But there was more. It was not merely his outlandish appearance—to which most were accustomed—that had torn the attention of the audience from Jason's discourse, but the evident distress and misery of the fellow's bearing, the tears that streamed down his cheeks and the whole air of imponderable misfortune that he brought with him as he shambled up the aisle, holding out the pale palms of his hands in supplication towards one and another of the people who attempted to stop him.

With a smothered exclamation, Jason dropped from the platform, shouldered his way between agitated ladies, and, flinging back his head with that air of a resentful cocksparrow which is common to many people of insignificant stature when they desire to impress their importance on others of nobler build, addressed his father's servant.

"What is it? What business have you here?"

The negro came to a standstill, as though stupefied. His eyes rolled upwards, as though in appeal to heaven, until only their immense rolling globes were visible; he heaved a shuddering sigh, and a sob broke bubbling from his lips.

"Oh, oh, oh, merciful Gawd! Oh, Mars' Hercules . . . !"

In the chaos which followed, Miss Orabella Burmester, whose sharp eyes registered everything, was the only person who remembered noticing, on the rain-spattered plush of the black man's livery, a small, brindled feather, clotted with blood at the tip.

Jason and his wife were bundled into a coach which someone placed at their disposal; they were too mean to employ anything but an occasional hackney carriage from time to time. The two Miss Floods, in hysterics, sent for their linkman, and stumbled off through the rain to Queen Square. As the coach drove away, a single voice spoke the thought that was in the minds of many.

"There goes the richest man in Bristol!"

IV

It was said that Hercules Flood had not been lucky in his sons. The eldest, Jonathan, although a successful planter, who had made a fortune in the West Indies, was always an unsympathetic character: mean, hard and sanctimonious—critical, too, of his father's failings, which made the old man cut him out of his will, a matter which affected Jonathan little, save in his self-esteem, as he was a rich man in his own right. On his West Indian plantation he reared, with the virtuous co-operation of the daughter of another English planter, a numerous family, none of whom had seen, or were likely to see, the country of their derivation. Punctually, as each fresh olive branch arrived to enrich the stock, Jonathan sent formal notification to Bristol; old Hercules, on receiving these precious epistles, swore violently, before consigning them to the flames. It was like Jonathan to breed like a rabbit, while James—James, his favourite . . . well, none of Jonathan's litter should see a penny of his money.

Jason, the second son, no less mean and virtuous, was more prudent; he judged it politic to keep on the right side of his father, though this meant closing his lips upon many matters which chafed for utterance. Jason knew on which side his bread was buttered; with Jonathan out of the way, and himself in virtual control of the firm, he was due for a fortune on his father's death. He was an excellent man of business—nearly as good as his father; but he lacked Hercules' instinct for an expedient generosity. It was said of Hercules that he never made a gift without the sure prospect of its return in kind; but Jason never made a gift at all. And this, as any commercial knows, is bad business.

James, the youngest, had not pleased his father by taking to the sea; but they were on amicable terms, although James rightly resented his father's attitude to the wife he had chosen—the niminy-piminy fine lady who brought with her an infinitesimal dowry, and did not even make up for it by giving him a family. It was some unfortunate romantic streak in James's character that sent him roving towards the effete Merlyn brood, with half a dozen buxom Bristol lasses, their petticoats snugly lined with their fathers' commercial success, quite prepared to accompany to the altar the handsome young Flood, whose personal attractions were enhanced by his adventurous calling. Hercules had favoured in particular the daughter of one of his old friends, but she, after waiting as long as modesty allowed (there is no doubt she was prepared to further Hercules' plans), had married with a "foreigner" called Burmester, and James, to his father's disgust, brought home his frail Miss Merlyn, whose die-away graces did nothing to recommend her in her father-in-law's eyes.

Hercules' wife had testified in the most gratifying fashion to her husband's virility by bearing him eleven children, eight of whom survived only in small stone tablets in the burial ground of the Redcliff; it was a pity, but it was the way of those days, when fevers, the pox and absence of sanitation could be relied upon to solve the problems of over-population which might otherwise have arisen through the propagative zest of eighteenth-century couples.

The only child of James's marriage was the small boy Matthew, who,

orphaned at six through the wreck of the vessel of which his father was master, accepted with his widowed mother the dubious shelter of his uncle Jason's roof. It is to be supposed that Jason offered it as a matter of Christian duty, and to further his own credit with the godly; for he had, as we have seen, no generosity.

Hercules, not troubled by the godly, made no overtures to his son's widow, whom he could not abide. She was a delicate and nervous creature, despised by her relations-in-law for her failure to adapt herself to the accepted lot of the master mariner's wife; she never accompanied her husband on his voyages, so never, during the few years of their marriage, learned to regard him other than as a stranger, to whom she bore Matthew and one other, stillborn, infant, during their father's absences at sea. She must have been terribly lonely. Her own family had cast her off, for marrying beneath her, and on the money James allowed her, she had existed in rooms as far from his family as she could contrive; but, with his death, the means to preserve even this shadowy form of independence ceased.

She pined for six months under Jason's roof, and then she died, and the family ignored her last request—that she might be buried in a linen shroud, instead of in the woollen one that the law decreed. It meant the payment of a five-pound tax, and they decided she was not worth it. Matthew, who overheard the discussion, dated his coherent loathing of his uncle and aunt from that day. He was not a particularly affectionate child, but he had loved, after his fashion, his gentle, sickly mother, and their indifference to her last wish made a bitter and ineradicable impression upon his mind.

A bitter and headstrong little boy, for ever at odds with authority, lived for nine years upon the charity of his relations; a bitterer and more headstrong man returned, after ten years' absence, to deal with problems which, but for the seeds of evil implanted in his childhood, might never have arisen; and this was Matthew Flood, whose lamentable history this book professes to chronicle.

CHAPTER II

I

"A FIG for all yer colour-argyments—yer Tassels, Toppings, Muffs an' Rosecombs! Hold yer brawlin', Jack! Attend to me, Tom—an' I'll pitch ye a stave:

" 'The Scarlet-coloured cock, my lord likes best,
And next to him, the Grey with threstle-breast.
This knight is for the Pile, or else the Black;
A third cries no cock like Dun, Yellow back;
The Milk-white cock with Golden legs and bill,
Or else the Cuckoo, chuse you which you will.
Don Magnus swears (of all) these are the best,
They heel, says he, more true than all the rest.
But this is all mere fancy, and no more.
The Colour's nothing, as I said before.' "

"Bravo, grandfather!" cried Matthew, joining in the general applause. Another week and we'll have you on the Sod."

"Under it, ye mean," muttered Hercules, closing his eyes after the long effort. "I—I've seen me last main."

"Nonsense, man!" cried spiritedly one of the company—a man of such plethoric habit that he looked as though he might at any moment burst into a purple flame. "Mortality—as our friend Fordyce will tell you—starts in the brain. Egad, if I'd a memory to equal yours, I'd feel fit for another fifty years."

The bloated leaden mask—lead that had melted and dripped in grotesque swags and pendulums about its bony armature—twisted into the semblance of a grin. A mottled eyelid fell.

"An' mark ye, Tom: me precious son—me holy Jason—ses I'm losin' me wits." A difficult jerk of the head drew the other nearer to the bed. "D'ye know what he's up to now?" queried Hercules, lowering his voice, for, friendly as he was with the rest, he was not anxious to publish his family grievances to the whole of Bristol. "Him an' Clay, puttin' their heads together? They're tryin' to fix up a power o' 'torney, on the grounds I'm no longer capable of runnin' me own affairs. Luckily for me, Fordyce refuses to stand in with 'em; they've got to get his word for it before their schemes come off. Hey, Fordyce; Fordyce! How much did Jason offer 'ee to square the devil—eh?"

"Well, well, well; who'd ha' thought it?" Tom Shergill showed, in every line of his fleshy countenance, his profound horror of this exhibition of filial perfidy.

"Hush—keep it to yerself. I get no satisfaction out o' knowing me son's a hypocritical trickster," mumbled Hercules. "An' a fool—mark ye, a fool! That's the worst of it. Jason knows what the town knows—that everything's comin' to him; but he's impatient. Impatience is a silly vice——"

"And an ugly one, at times," muttered Shergill, sprinkling the fronts of his vast waistcoat with snuff. "You know I mean no offence, Hercules, when I say I never could abide Jason. Damme if I can remember, half the time, that he's your son. Still, 'tisin't the first time queer wine's come out of a good cask; and if you've regrets on one side, you've got plenty of cause to congratulate yourself on another." He lowered his voice to a wheezy whisper to add: "The young 'un's the spit of his father, ain't he? Damme if I wouldn't ha' took him for James, if I'd met him in the town."

Hercules winced; he never welcomed references to the one son he had truly loved. Fortunately a diversion was caused by the approach of another couple to the bed—Fordyce, his friend and doctor, and the fellow Hercules still thought of as "young" Ralph Burmester, although his handsome head was grey as a badger's (on account of the heat, all wigs were tossed aside) and he was father of two of the prettiest marriageable misses in Bristol. Hercules had forgiven Burmester for cutting out his youngest son with agreeable Miss Lyddie Casamajor; had even given proof of his forgiveness by sponsoring Ralph's freemanship (he was not, like the others, Bristol born) and his election to the Society of Merchant Adventurers. He favoured this "young" man, whose air was more polished and sophisticated than that of the majority of his associates, and who raised his glass to his recumbent host with an elegance not wholly due to the ruffles of finest lawn that encircled his wrist.

"Your health, sir. It's good to be with you again. So far as your friends went, you might as well have been in a Newgate cell, these past seven months." Another rub for Jason, as all present recognized.

"There's the ruffian ye have to thank for it." Hercules nodded at the young man who sat between the wall and the end of the bed.

Matthew flung back his head and laughed; his brows and his teeth made two bars, of black and of white, across the dark sallowness of his face. Even seated, it was evident he was of immense proportions; his shoulders were as broad as the yoke upon which the milkmaid carries her pails, and the muscles of his calves strained to extremity the fine silken hose which the Spitalfields manufacturers were obliged to weave especially to his measure.

The Bristol gentlemen smiled, a little awkwardly. They did not quite know what to make of Matthew, who had appeared in their midst after an absence of ten years, during which it had been tacitly assumed that it was wiser to keep his name out of conversations with the Flood family. Yet here he was, apparently established once more in their midst, and in high favour with his grandfather. An intriguing situation.

"Where's my slave? Fill up me pipe an' fetch another bottle. It's no good yer makin' wry faces, Fordyce; ye've not got Jason under yer thumb to-night—ye've got me grandson to deal with, an' that, ye'll admit, 's a very diff'rent proposition!"

A laugh went round at the expense of the little doctor, who grinned good-humouredly. It was not he who had prescribed Hercules his stringent régime; when a man was dying, let him die happy, in full enjoyment of the indulgences which had helped to bring him to his grave. Still, he was not without apprehension as to the outcome of the night. If anything should happen to Hercules, through over-excitement, or indulgence in the pleasures his son's over-solicitude

had latterly denied him, it was going to be very awkward indeed when it came to explanations.

"Get on—get on!" Hercules was clamouring. "Where's yer cocks? Deliver 'em! God damme, what sort of a main's this—with the whole comp'ny of ye sittin' round like old maids at a christnin'? Set 'em, boys—set yer birds."

Someone opened the door and shouted into the passage, and two rough-looking fellows, with sacks under their arms, came into the room, the centre of which had already been cleared, and a mat flung across the polished boards.

"Get out of me light—sit down, all of ye," gasped Hercules, the bright spark of the old cocker kindling in his extinguished eyes. "Now, boys, are ye ready? Whose are the birds? Yer old swisher, Ralph?—an' Tom's red. Five pounds on the battle, boys—an' twenty for the winner of the main!"

A murmur of appreciation greeted this generous offer, which Ralph Burmester immediately capped with a bet on his own bird.

"Ye dam'fool nigger, fill Mr. Burmester's glass. Fill up, boys. I'll have a sovereign on yer red, Tom—an' Fordyce shall hold the stakes."

The company settled into the chairs which surrounded the improvised "pit," and the two setters, having unbagged the birds, presented them beak to beak, then, as they lunged, tossed them upon the mat. Both baulked, and Fordyce, who, as the best amateur setter in the county, had assumed charge of the proceedings, started the slow count.

"—seventeen—eighteen—nineteen—twenty—"

"Five pun' to a crown on the swisher-top!"

"Twenty-three—twenty-four—twenty-five—"

"Ay, by God. . . . By God!"

Two crouched figures leap back, their shadows strike upwards on the wall red with fire and candlelight. The bed creaks under the weight of the sick man, propped painfully on his elbow. The frieze of heads and shoulders stiffens—as, from the space in the midst of the onlookers, volley upwards the locked opponents, with brazen rattle of wings and flash of spurs. The intensity of the encounter—which lasts but for a second, but holds the incalculability of eternity—draws a growl of appreciation from the spectators. The struggle—centre splits; one half drops, the other remains for a second, beating the air with inadequate pinions, before it sinks, to be caught in the upward surge of the fallen half, which gives the hoverer its advantage. A single downward stroke, reinforced by the weight of the descending body, sends a significant stream spurting across the boards, and a limp feathery heap, topped with crimson-dabbled silver, sinks, while its owner captures and hoods the victorious Brassywing.

"Your cock's too heavy, Tom," good-temperedly remarked the owner of the swisher-top, as he handed over his guineas.

"Four pun' thirteen."

"Five pounds, if an ounce. And I see you still favour the silver spur."

"Your true cock'll win in silver; 'tis your runaway has need of the steel," wheezed Shergill, reviving the age-old argument of the cocker, which, in a moment, plunged the assembly into uproar.

"'Tis a fiddlin' lie! Put yer young bird into steel, an', true or tricky, he'll win every time." "To hell with spurs, silver or steel; give me the cock that

fighters barefoot—none of your dull-heeled fellows, slow to strike and missing nine strokes in ten.” “Ay, ay—yer narrer-heeled cock, that strikes to kill. Like my Nergal. The heel—the heel——” “Nay, nay, Hercules: the heel’s verminous——”

The negro went round with the wine, replenishing the glasses; the room was close as an oven, and already stank of sweat, alcohol and bird-dung. On the top of the bed-tester, where they had been placed for safety, candles guttered in their immense, silver sconces; each time the door was opened their flames blew horizontal and a darkness descended, in which the shifting company resembled the dark denizens of some Vulcanian cavern.

II

“It be no business of ourn to grumble—wi’ a guinea a-piece to shut our gobs; but ’tis a queer set-out for sure!”

“A guinea goes a long way—an’ if so be I’ve not to answer for it, the mesters is welcome to their bit o’ fun.”

“Eh—yer skeered o’ Jason, is that it?” The speaker tittered. “Ay, ’ee’s but a little fellow, Hob—even Jason can over-top ’ee!”

“Maybe young Matthew’s fists ’ull settle the matter more final than Polly’s petticoats. Ecod, there’s a pair o’ shoulders for ’ee! Ecod, I’d like to match ’un against Corny Harris: I wager Brislington ’ud whistle for its champion.”

“His dad were just such another, weren’t he, Jake?”

“That were ’e; I seen Cap’n James lift up a pair o’ sailors, one in each ’and, an’ crack their ’eads together, like as if they was cokenuts. ’E were a powerful mighty man, were Cap’n James, an’ the young ’un bids fair to match ’im.”

“I ’eerd tell ’twere for killing a man as they sacked ’im from Floods.”

“I thowt ’ee swung for murder!” gaped a simple-looking fellow with his hat pushed to the back of his head. The others grinned.

“There’s murder *an’* murder; an’ ’t’ud be main ork’erd to hang a gennelman o’ the name o’ Flood!”

“But ’twere in Lunnon town, weren’t it?” persisted the simple one, to the scorn of his companions.

“Flood be Flood, whether it be Lunnon town or Bristol city: an’ I reckon ’t’ud take more’n they Lunnon chaps to fetch a Flood to th’ gallows.”

“What’s the browt ’im back, think ’ee? ’Tis but a sour welcome ’e’ll get from the family.”

“Reckon ’is nose brought ’im!” snickered a red-headed fellow who, with a pair of cocking shears in his hands, was trimming the rump of the bird he held head downwards between his knees. “Talk o’ the stink o’ corpses—I reckon there’s some smells sweeter than honey, to them as stands to profit!”

In the adjoining chamber, a little man in blue poplin edged his chair nearer to lawyer Shergill’s, and spoke nervously, casting a glance across his shoulder.

“Dam’ funny set-out, ain’t it? ’Twouldn’t do for word to get down to Bristol—Jason ’ud have the law on us, and ’twould ruin my business if I was had before the magistrates for cocking on private property!”

“Egad, man!” Shergill, as ardent a cocker as his host, hunched a contemp-

tuous shoulder. "I'm a magistrate meself, ain't I?—and plague take me if I can't put that ass Jason in his place."

"Ay," said the other doubtfully. "But 'tis all a very shady to-do—and I've no wish to fall foul of Jason, that can do folks a deal of harm if he's minded that way. This young chap—what d'you suppose he's after? I heard tell they'd forbid him the house, after that affair in London——"

"Pst! Let bygones be bygones. The old boy's evidently taken that for his motto," muttered Shergill, with a sly glance towards the bed. "After all, James was his favourite, and it seems but natural he should welcome the lad——"

"'Tis more than Jason's done, I'll be bound," sniggered the other.

"A song—what about a song?" someone was yelling.

"To hell with singing—where's the cocks?" "They ain't ready yet—'tis the fault of Hercules, who took us by surprise." "Come, sing!" "Nay, I'm too full of wine!"

"I'll give you a song, gentlemen!"

Matthew Flood rose from the foot of the bed; his head almost reached to its tester, and the candle-flames dancing in his eyes and the smile that curled his lips lent him an air of pagan mischief that isolated him from the fuddled gentlemen who made polite noises of encouragement to cover their unease.

Matthew flung back his head and let the great volume of his voice pour into the smoke-laden air.

" 'Bacchus must now his power resign—
I am the only God of Wine!
It is not fit the wretch should be
In competition set with me,
Who can drink ten times more than he.' "

"(All together, gentlemen, please)——"

" 'Who can drink ten times more than he! ' "

" 'Make a new world, ye powers divine!
Stock'd with nothing else but Wine!
Let Wine the only product be,
Let Wine be earth, and air, and sea—
And let that Wine be all for me! ' "

" 'And let that Wine be all for me! ' "

("Egad, it's James come to life again!" "Egad, this'll put Jason's nose out of joint!" "I'll wager there'll be a peck o' trouble out o' this." "To hell with your croaking, Jack! Bring in the cocks.")

III

Arms crossed, lips curled in a cynical smile, Matthew, leaning against the bedpost, looked upon the saturnalia his own efforts had conjured. By contrast

with the rest—Ralph Burmester excepted—his own figure struck a note of insolent superiority, of which its owner was not unconscious. These Bristol hogs! But hogs that paid their bills, owned property and whose credit, if they chose to exert it, could procure for them all the amenities they lacked the breeding to employ. His teeth gritted lightly together.

They were as drunk as owls—as well they might be, having been at it since three!—and money circulated as freely as the wine. In the half-light—many of the candles had burnt out, and Africa was kept too busy replenishing the glasses, sweeping the floor clear of dung and fanning the smoke, which inconvenienced both onlookers and birds, out through the door, to renew them—the tipsy men stumbled about, falling over the furniture, beating off the birds which, hastily assembled, had in most instances been insufficiently clipped, and soared above the spectators' heads in a whirl of blood and scattered feathers.

Matthew thought of the scenes which must have taken place in this room: the consummations, births and deaths its walls must have sheltered, the lovers' whispers, the marital disagreements, the last sacraments for the dying. Here nervous Flood brides had gasped for mercy, proud Flood matrons had presented their husbands with the newborn heir. Fingers that were long since dust had plied their skill through long winter evenings upon the embroidered hangings that, torn from the bed-tester and spattered with candle-grease, were now trodden beneath the blundering feet of Hercules' guests. A great laugh was raised when Doctor Fordyce, catching his spur in the stuff, was brought sprawling to the floor, with Shergill straddling him like Gargantua; it took four people to rescue the doctor from his perilous situation.

What would all those sober and dignified Floods have thought of this spectacle? Taking malicious pleasure in the scene of destruction, Matthew ignored their sentiments. It was virtually Jason's property that was being destroyed, and he liked the idea of mortifying Jason. He refilled his grandfather's glass, bending over the bed, to cry with sparkling eyes:

"Enjoying yourself, grandfather? By God, you're making history to-night!"

Hercules' appearance was appalling. Stifling with heat, he had torn open the front of his bedgown, and, through the grizzled forest of his great, heaving chest, the sweat ran down in rivulets from a face that was now little but an amorphous lump of sodden purple, in which his eyes rolled, seeking their focus.

"Take that damned sugarbaker off me feet!" The little man in poplin had collapsed across the end of the bed; Matthew, laughing, heaved him on to the floor. "That you, Matthew, me boy? Yer a good rogue; whatever brings ye here—an' I'll wager it's not con-consideration for me welfare—ye've got a heart. Ye won't stand by an' watch an ol' man per-perishin' for the bread o' life! Ye won't make a pri-prisoner of an ol' man too helpless to fend for himself. D'ye hear me, boys? This—this is me b'loved grandson—in whom—in whom I am well—pleased!" Hercules uttered the blasphemous quotation with a solemnity that compelled respectful, if brief, attention from the company.

"A goo' gran'shon! A goo' cocker an' a goo' gran'shon," hiccupped Shergill, defeated by weight and wine in his effort to rise. "Damme if I don't drain a glassh to a goo' gran'shon."

"Saved me from Jason!" Hercules was now sniggering. "Jason saves me

from th' Devil—an' this—fella-me-lad comes along t' save me from Jason! T' hell with Jason. Starves me—takes me 'bacca from me—an' me wine—an' me friends—an' says he's savin' me from the Devil! There's a fine way for a son to treat his ol' father! Sooner have Devil than Jason—Devil's me only friend."

As Hercules melted into tears of self-pity, Ralph Burmester came up to Matthew. He was more sober than the others, but his gait was not quite steady and his handsome face was crimson. The look he gave Matthew made the latter wonder if this game he had organized was as discreet as it might have been.

"Now, sir"—he had turned to Hercules. "It's time we were leaving. We aren't all as fortunate as yourself—to lie abed as long as it pleases us in the morning."

"Be damned to you for a spoilsport," said Hercules peevishly. "Where's the cocks? Be damned to ye, Ralph—are ye turnin' yer coat for the sake of keepin' the right side o' Jason? I suppose yer thinkin' you'll have him to reckon with when the ol' man's gone? Be damned to ye all—where's yer cocks? Where's my Nergal—that'll beat the whole moultin' lot of 'em?"

Ralph withdrew into the shadow of the curtains with Matthew.

"This has gone too far!"

Matthew raised his eyebrows.

"It's difficult to stop my grandfather when his spirits are roused," he returned, with a touch of insolence that implied it was none of Burmester's business. The elder man looked at him coldly.

"Was this your plan or his?"

"Egad!" laughed Matthew. "I hardly know. I arrived to find the poor old man perishing of boredom, my aunt reading the Bible to him, and uncle Jason established as the bully of the household. It seemed an unbecoming state of affairs, so I suggested a remedy which, though perhaps a little violent, seems to justify itself in its effects. You can't deny that grandfather is having a very happy time!"

"Shergill, Tom Shergill!" Hercules was roaring. A couple of roisterers succeeded in supporting the practically comatose lawyer to the edge of the bed, on which he collapsed, like a quivering bladder, trying to force his eyes open and to pay attention to his host. "Tom, ye drunken rascal—listen to me. Get on with yer cockfightin', the rest of ye; have in the next pair—have in Nergal and Jack Peddy's Brassywing. Do ye hear me, Jack? I'll wager fifty guineas on my cock against yours. . . . Where's Tom? Harkee, Tom——"

Finding Matthew unresponsive, Ralph Burmester tackled Fordyce, who, passed into the melancholy stage of inebriety, sat propped in his chair with his legs stretched out before him, mournfully surveying his feet, with his hands thrust in his breeches pockets.

"Fordyce, aren't you going to put a stop to this? There'll be murder done in this room before the night's out."

"Murder? What th' hell d'you mean—murder?" mumbled the doctor, squinting upwards at his companion.

"It's enough to kill a young and healthy person. Where's your duty to your patient, man? An inquiry on to-night's events won't favour you in the neighbourhood."

But it was evidently useless to talk to Fordyce. Burmester sought for his wig, found it among the pile of feathers and offal that the sweepers had pushed into a corner of the room, and relinquished it with a grimace. He passed on the threshold the setters-to, who had been summoned from the adjoining apartment.

It now became evident that intemperance was not confined to the gentlemen. The owners of fighting cocks had each brought with them their setters, and, in several instances, the keepers of the pens, and these had, by Matthew's instructions, been plentifully supplied with alcohol in accordance with their coarser tastes. The men who entered were too drunk even to unbag the cocks, and this caused a diversion that drew the attention of all from the bed, where Tom Shergill, collapsed upon his elbow, had his ear close to Hercules' mouth, while his fuddled mind struggled to grasp the import of what the other was saying. With a groan of frustration, Hercules flung up his arm.

"Damnation on the lot of ye—ye wine-sodden pigs! So Jason says I've lost me wits, does he? Before God, I've got more wits about me than you, Tom Shergill—that calls yerself a lawyer! Africa—Africa——!"

As the black man hurried to his side, it was only his familiarity with the old man's idiom that enabled him to interpret his commands. No one but Tom Shergill, struggling towards sobriety, observed Africa's exit and his return, or what he carried in his hand.

IV

In view of following events, it seems prudent to set down, at this point, the names of the actual witnesses to them. Besides the shabby little cluster of professionals, the household staff, which, as time wore on, and discipline waned with the heightening excitement, had penetrated into the chamber, and the two Floods—there were, as we have already seen, Fordyce the doctor, Shergill the lawyer, Mr. Montagu the timid little sugarbaker, and John Peddy, merchant and part-owner with Hercules of several ships, among them the trader, *Virgin Queen*: these were all old schoolfellows and cronies of Hercules, whose community of tastes had kept them together through the crowded years.

There were also two brothers, named Cruikshank, the elder of whom owned extensive shipping interests, and was reported to have done well out of the slave-trade, while the other, a retired shipmaster, now dealt in marine tackle, and had recently married, according to the naïve announcements of the times, "a young lady of plentiful fortune and every other engaging accomplishment"! Ralph Burmester had withdrawn. The company therefore numbered eight, which the servants and nondescripts brought up to more nearly a score.

The hour was not late—Jason's convocation on anti-slavery, which took place on the heels of the evening "meeting," in a room adjoining the Methodist chapel, was, it will be remembered, in full swing.

The day was well chosen for the clandestine exploit Matthew had planned; being the Sabbath, they were immune from his uncle's and aunt's invasions, since, in addition to their formal exercises, both Jason and Ann indulged on Sundays a veritable orgy of good deeds, including visits to the aged, defenceless sick, Bible readings for charity scholars, addresses in alms-houses and

improvised services in sailors' taverns—services to which, it may be said, the landlords strenuously objected, since they effectually emptied the premises of paying customers. It was by no means uncommon to find Jason and his wife dolefully trolling a hymn to an audience composed of the potboy, some melancholy trollop of a scrubwoman and the tavern cat; but these unwelcome invasions had to be supported, since they took place in the name of Flood. Hercules first swore, then laughed himself sick, when he heard of them. He was prepared ironically to encourage any activities that relieved him of his daughter-in-law's society.

"Mars' Hercules' compliments, and he hopes Mars' Peddy will do him the honour to dine at three—and bring his cock!"

The invitations, distributed among the cronies (all of whom had paid tribute to a God whom most of them regarded as a useful business partner, at the churches of St. Mary Redcliff, All Saints or St. Werburgh, as convenience dictated), caused much laughter, curiosity and pleasure. The gloomy reports circulated by Jason, and reluctantly confirmed by the doctor, had made them give up their old comrade for dead, especially since, by Jason's orders, all access to him was forbidden. They entered with zest into what they slyly guessed was a joke at Jason's expense.

It was but little after nine when the orgy approached its climax; but the noise and stench and disorder had reached a pitch which made even Matthew's senses reel, as he strode over to put a stop to a bout of fisticuffs which had started between a couple of the drunken setters. One of the maidservants was screaming, another, her fat breast cupped in the elder Cruikshank's hand, had gone into a fit of hysterics. Matthew saw Shergill lumber across the room, seize the red-headed fellow who looked after his pens by the back of the neck and trundle him towards the bed—and wondered what it was about. He could not see his grandfather, between whom and the rest of the room stood Simon Cruikshank, swaying, with a candle-stick in his unsteady hand.

"Look out!" cried Matthew—too late: for the flame, licking the bedcurtain, had already kindled it; a red tongue ran along the fringe—

"Fire!" yelled Shergill, and, too drunk to know what he was doing, flung a bottle at the flames. Fortunately missing its aim, it fell upon the head of the prostrate sugarbaker and restored him to his senses, while Matthew, leaping across the room, tore down the curtain, rolled it up and bundled it, still smouldering, through the window, across the head of Jack Peddy, who had just opened it to vomit into the night.

Hardly any one realized the incident; Matthew, his right sleeve scorched away, was by now wrought to a pitch of excitement in which he was not even conscious of the pain of his burnt arm.

"How about it, Doctor? These rogues are of no more use to us, but I'll set a bird if you'll set t'other."

Fordyce, a little recovered, rose to the challenge. Between them, they managed once more to clear the "pit"—now littered with broken glass from the chandelier, into which one of the birds had hurtled, with pipe-dottle and with feathers. Someone lifted the sugarbaker and propped him in a chair. Shergill was muttering to Cruikshank, his finger laid to the side of his fat nose, and they were both chuckling. More candles were brought; from the stripped tester they blazed down upon the bed, and Matthew later remembered wonder-

ing at a dark stain which had suddenly appeared, and spread down the side of the mattress from which, at his master's orders, Africa had dragged the coverings. The great limbs of Hercules Flood lay almost naked, in a pool of wine, ash and candle-grease.

"Heave me up—heave me up!" he was gasping. Knowing that no one else was strong enough, even had he been in a condition, to obey, Matthew slipped his hands under the old man's armpits and lodged him against the bolsters. "More cocks—more cocks!" he clamoured, rolling his head impatiently against the support.

Fordyce was handling Jack Peddy's famous Brassywing, regarded as invincible by the local fancy—which had already accounted for Burmester's swisher-top and for both of the other birds it had encountered.

Matthew took Nergal from the bag—his grandfather's celebrated black, famed through the countryside as the model of all that a fighting cock should be. The small, vicious head he still kept hooded, for self-protection, but, even blindfold, those in the vicinity were not immune from the darting thrusts of the long, muscular neck. It was many months since Nergal had had a fight, but, thanks to his keeper, he was in perfect condition: each feather thin and hard as leaf-metal, iron-hard in back and beam, with blood-red comb, cropped to a mere thread of scarlet, and bold, beady eye. It should be a notable combat; Matthew was keen enough cocker to regret that it should take place before an audience so poorly qualified to appreciate it.

The light was abominable; veils of blue smoke, of varying density, made visibility indifferent. The visitors, slumped in their chairs, and the little group of shabbily dressed dependents, who propped themselves as best they could against the walls, were as indistinct as creatures seen through the slimy waters of an aquarium.

In kneeling, Matthew cut his knee with a shard of broken glass. Overhead, the bad old oil-paintings of some of his forefathers looked down upon a scene unequalled in the records of their house. Around their frames, and stuck to the swags and mouldings in high relief that expressed the exotic fancy of Georgian architecture, clotted tufts of blood and feather testified to the evening's entertainment. Matthew grinned. There was not a sound, except the harsh, croaking breath of his grandfather.

"Go in!"

By its little red tassel he snatched the hood from Nergal's head and thrust him towards the Brassywing. As a presentation it could hardly have been clumsier, but Fordyce's was worse. Sober, he had just the combinations of light-handedness, quick eyesight and agility that make the perfect setter-to: but on this occasion he practically dropped his bird—which drew a roar of protest from John Peddy, who had wagered five pounds on his cock.

The birds, however, met in air, each striking and missing, the Brassywing with such violence that he was flung over on his back. Fordyce lurched in to right him, while Matthew caught Nergal and prevented him from demolishing his enemy. Each set his bird for the second in-go.

A stream of exhortations, imprecations and endearments poured from the lips of Hercules; who, lunging ever more and more weakly from side to side of his bed, followed each movement of the cocks with as painful an intensity as though he had himself been one of the combatants. Identifying himself

with his own bird, he hurled defiance at the Brassywing, whose snake-like backward and forward dartings of gleaming neck seemed for a second or two to puzzle Nergal, hovering for his opportunity to deliver the death-stroke. It was the Brassywing who first drew blood; a bright red drop from some deep recess of Nergal's plumage fell on the back of Matthew's hand as he again captured him. The tangling of a spur in the mat started the third in-go. Matthew presented his cock admirably.

"A born cocker, by God! Me grandson's a born cocker. Fifty to one, in guineas, on me cock—is it taken? Tom Shergill, are ye there? Wake up that damned sugarbaker and show him the meanin' of cockin'! Yer cock's a shyster, Jack; yer cock's a moultin'—verminous—villainous—shyster!"—each word kept time with the downward stroke of a spur. "Go in, Nergal, my son! Go in, me bold an' beamin' boy! Go in, me angel with the flamin' sword——!"

Shouts echoed and wagers were laid that no one heeded—for the pure joy of witnessing an immortal contest outran the interest in pecuniary gain. The cocks were superbly matched in spirit and size, and the chances seemed to be even when, with a rattle and vibration of plumage so rapid as almost to render them invisible, they broke apart, and the black cock, mounting, swooped with a stroke so precise and deadly as to draw a whistling breath from the onlookers, and clove his opponent from chin to chine.

His own breast incarnadined, and an eye sacrificed to victory, he stood for a moment, as though petrified by the silence which had fallen, then, as applause broke out, lifted his truncated wings, launched himself upward, and, gaining by a miracle purchase upon the bed-tester, trumpeted his archdæmonic triumph above the candle flames.

At the same moment, raising his hands and his eyes in a gesture of adoration, and with a smile of magnificat upon his lips, Hercules collapsed among his pillows.

"Grandfather! Fordyce—Fordyce—my grandfather——!"

"He's gone," muttered the doctor, after a brief examination.

Shergill muttered, "God ha' mercy on us!" and edged, as rapidly as his bulk would allow, towards the door. "Let's out—let's out!" Some were capable only of taking their departure upon hands and knees. Matthew assumed control of the situation, leaping to prevent the stampede.

"Off—off—as fast as your legs'll carry you! But if any man among you says a word of what you've seen to-night, I'll reckon with him later!"

Presently he sought for Africa: but the black man had vanished—was already sobbing and stumbling his way down St. Michael's hill.

"We'd better set the place in order," suggested Fordyce.

"Nay," said Matthew, who had flung himself into a chair. "Let be. It will do my uncle good to see it."

He was fearfully sober, but stunned, for the moment, by the realization of what he had done.

His reception of his uncle and aunt, on their arrival, was, as we have seen, cold-blooded; it was not for these intruders, when they had taken in all those unforgettable and gruesome details of the death-chamber, to know that, going into the apartment which he had occupied since his return, Matthew turned the key in the lock, flung himself on the bed, and burst into a passion of tears.

"Turn him round!" cried Hercules.

He felt his head seized, with a curious gentleness. The pipe clattered on the floor. Fortunately Africa's foresight in placing a bowl immediately behind his chair prevented a worse disaster. . . .

II

According to romantic laws, this should have been the beginning of a life-long attachment between Matthew Flood and his grandfather; but perhaps Hercules was too old, too sunk in his indulgences of wine and food, to cultivate the society of a stripling who could not properly be said to appreciate either.

From that day until, at fifteen, he sought to enlist his grandfather's support in his revolt against the plans which were being made for his future, they saw little of each other. The youth who presented himself, with a confidence that was mainly histrionic before the swollen, Buddha-like figure of the old magnate, was formidably overgrown, and his daily visits to the barber had already shadowed his upper lip. He met with little encouragement.

"Ye've got yer bread to earn, haven't ye? Flood's don't exist for the upkeep of wastrels."

"I've got no disposition towards the business."

"An' for what, may I ask, are ye disposed?"

Matthew parried the question.

"Did my father leave me no money?"

"Ha! So that's what yer after."

"Haven't I the right to know?"

"An' if he did?"

"When do I come into it?"

"At twenty-one, an' not a day before," said Hercules tersely.

"Six years! It might as well be eternity," groaned Matthew. "Look at me, grandfather: I am but fifteen, yet I have all the parts of a man. I can leap and ride and fight the equal of any fellow ten years older than myself. I'm not a wastrel, but in every way I'm unsuited to become a timber merchant. I should like to go away and seek my fortune——"

"Have ye taken leave of yer wits?"

"No more than my uncle Jonathan, when he went to the Indias. You say when I come of age I'm to have my father's money. I don't know what it amounts to, but I think it can't be much, for I've heard my mother say we had very little to live on, beyond my father's pay. What is it? A thousand? Two thousand? Why don't you tell me? You're the principal trustee, aren't you? It's no good asking uncle Jason, for just for the pleasure of thwarting me he'd refuse to tell me what I've every right to know."

"The less ye crow about yer rights, young cock, the better," said Hercules, with a bleared glint of warning that made Matthew bite his lip: he had gambled on his grandfather's known distaste for Jason's habits and now, it seemed, he had gone too far. He gave a sullen grin of apology which Hercules ignored, rumbling, "There's a certain capital, that consarns ye no more than it consarns my nigger: for ye can't lay finger on a penny of it, and at yer death it returns to the estate, to profit"—he broke off to leer—"yer uncle Jason's children."

"And what about mine?" cried Matthew, with what neither, for the moment, perceived as ludicrous concern "Upon my soul—I think it hard I cannot leave what is justly mine to my children after I am dead!"

"An', if the question be not indiscreet, how many children have ye, up to the present?" asked Hercules sardonically.

"None," muttered Matthew.

"Is that by God's grace, or yer own?" persisted the old rogue.

"If you must have it—by God's," blurted out Matthew, shaken into truth by his grandfather's penetrant glare.

Hercules wagged his head.

"Tch, tch, tch—an' still a lad at school! Ye should be ashamed of yerself."

"I've left school," said Matthew. Despite his grandfather's raillery, he felt a sudden increase in manly stature; in such fashion might Hercules rally a person of his own years; it was flattery in its way—and altogether different from the sanctimonious censure of his uncle, who would surely have gone out of his mind, had he known that Matthew had made acquaintance of the women of the Backs. "Then," he pursued, returning to the former subject, "if I cannot touch the capital, what income do I derive from it?—for that's what concerns me most."

"If yer thinkin' of raisin' a family," said Hercules, to whom the graceless joke seemed to appeal, "I warn ye, it'll be poor pickin's; for it's no more than a hundred and fifty pounds. So take heed of that, me fine feller, an' marry a rich wife, if yer not minded to make an honest living for yerself."

"It certainly isn't much," Matthew, crestfallen, admitted. He wanted, but did not dare, to ask his grandfather why he had made such unfair division of the family fortunes, as to allow James, whom he had loved, so mean a portion, and the unlikeable Jason the lion's share. "But, at a pinch, one could manage. By oneself, I mean. And by the time I'm twenty-one—" He broke off to square his shoulders. "What's a hundred and fifty pounds to a grown person? With any luck I shall be worth fifty times as much, and I could repay it to you, if you liked, in a lump sum, out of my own capital!" As his grandfather blinked, Matthew cried: "Don't you see, grandfather? If you will advance me the money now, it will support me until I've decided upon my future career. I can have no career," he ended passionately, "that is controlled by my uncle Jason."

A faint gleam of sympathy, instantly suppressed, lightened in Hercules' eye. The antagonism between Jason and his nephew was town gossip; it had passed out of the category of avuncular strife with a rebellious schoolboy into that of deep and abiding enmity between grown men.

"He wants me in the business as little as I desire to be with him," pleaded Matthew. "Believe me, grandfather, nothing but evil can come of sending me to work with uncle Jason. I almost think," he muttered, "that I might end by killing him, if I were subject always to his tyranny."

"And then ye'd swing for it; ye call yerself a man and talk like a child. Why can't ye go to sea; like yer father?"

"Why should I?—Apart from my father's, there's no seafaring blood in our family," retorted Matthew, with reason. "Nor am I content," he added scornfully, "to risk my life and limbs for the pittance a ship's master gets!"

"God damn, then what do ye want?" spluttered the old man.

"Anything, except to be put into the business, under uncle Jason," declared Matthew earnestly. On this point, at least, he was perfectly clear.

Matthew was no fool, and the unhappy experiences of his childhood had taught him discretion closely allied to cunning. He had frequently meditated an appeal to his grandfather, on the score of sympathy sensed, rather than proved in word or action; and he had hitherto refrained only because prudence warned him to reserve this measure for a more urgent need than had hitherto arisen, knowing, meanwhile, that the surest way of forfeiting Hercules' good will (if so strong a term could be applied to the tepid relationship which obtained between them) was to "make himself a nuisance" to the old man, whose character he had sized up well enough to rely on Hercules' indolence in any matter which did not directly concern himself and his business. He knew that his aunt's frequent threats to "tell your grandfather" all came to nothing—because Hercules would not be troubled with affairs which, by his own ordinance, were no concern of his. Jason and Ann had taken it upon themselves to bring up James's son; let them get on with it.

"Have you got no ambitions of yer own?" Hercules was muttering peevishly.

A dark wave of colour suddenly engulfed the boy's face, from chin to brow, and Hercules, perceiving it, was suddenly pricked with pride of that angry handsomeness, that neither of his living sons had ever shown. Jonathan and Jason: a pair of tallow candles! That spindle-shanked mediocrity was all from the maternal side—though Isobel Flood had been a fine, comely woman, putting to shame her stunted family, over which she had towered like an Arthurian queen. James had been the only one of the surviving children to represent worthily the paternal line, and now here was his son, triumphing over the thin Merlyn blood that so dangerously diluted the Flood corpuscles, and giving every promise of being the fine, upstanding youth his grandfather had been in the early twenties. A retrospective vanity, dangerous to common sense, softened Hercules' attitude to his grandson, as Matthew stammered:

"Of course I've got ambition. I want to be rich! I want to make as much money as you've done—as much as uncle Jonathan. I want to make it while I'm young, and—enjoy it. I don't want to live with my nose in a ledger—and I don't want to spend the whole of my life in Bristol. I want—" He stopped suddenly; the habit of mistrust which he had learned through the continual apprehension of correction resumed its seal upon his lips; he looked askance upon his grandfather, through eyes that glinted sidelong between their narrowed lids.

"Ye'll come," said Hercules slowly, "to a bad end."

The boy's face relaxed; his lips stretched into a broad grin, nearly as brilliant as Africa's, with its double row of gleaming teeth.

"So long as it is not a dull one, I think I will take the risk, grandfather," he ventured boldly.

"If I were ten years younger I'd flog the skin off yer back!"

"And I bet you could do it now, if you chose," said Matthew, sacrificing sincerity to flattery, for how could that dropsical hand, puffed and bluish-white like the jellyfish that high tide brought occasionally up the river, have wielded the stick in any fashion to damage his hardened sides? He felt a scornful pity, tinged with affection, for this fallen giant, victim of his own

lusts, and, at the same time, an intense, almost quivering respect. Matthew had heard his grandfather described variously as a "drunken sot," a "vile glutton," and a "sinful gambler," and had even been constrained, stifling unholly mirth in his clenched fists, to join in prayers for Hercules' "redemption." To each of the epithets he had thrilled as he might not have thrilled had they been pæans of praise: for they proved to him, through their phraseology of Methodism (which, during the years between 1737 and 1739, the years of the Whitefield missions, had swept the town with a flood of religious hysteria) that, whatever Hercules had forfeited in the estimation of the godly, he had lived his life unhampered by timorous considerations of virtue. For virtue Matthew had, already, a tremendous disrespect, which he kept to himself.

"If you don't take my side, grandfather, I'll run away," he announced, heartened by his grandfather's evident goodwill.

"An' fall in with the pressgang, or drink the King's shilling—eh?" Matthew bit his lip; it was precisely these considerations which had prevented him, up to now, from putting his threat into practice. He also saw, in the sceptical glint of Hercules' eye, recognition of a matter which he would have died rather than admitted: that all the circumstances of his upbringing, little luxurious as these had been, prejudiced him against the squalor of the run-away's existence. Matthew had all the snobbery of the bourgeois, that shrinks from hobnobbing with its inferiors; the penniless flight, the tramps' doss-house, the footsore progress towards an undefined, though doubtless glorious, goal—all these might be highly estimable and romantic measures, but only to be resorted to in emergency. Actually, Matthew suffered from all the big, overgrown youth's disinclination to prolonged physical effort, and it was physical indolence, as much as anything, which had kept him hitherto under the galling yoke of his uncle's authority: gaining such sour satisfaction as he might from the knowledge that the yoke, in this case, gave no less trouble to the driver than it did to its victim. It was not a little mortifying, however, to discover, in the present instance, that his boasting failed of its effect.

"Ye might do worse," Hercules was saying maliciously. "What's wrong with the navy?—or the army either, if it comes to it? An' the discipline 'ud do ye no harm; ye can do with plenty of it."

"If I was bought a commission——" Matthew began, doubtfully, and broke off to cry with contempt, "who ever heard of making a fortune in either? I should have to have an allowance, and even if there were plenty of wars, and I were to become a general, there's nothing to be made out of it, like there was in Marlborough's time! It 'ud be waste, grandfather——!"

"And this is waste," cut in Hercules impatiently—"of my time an' yours—that I venture to say is worth less of the two! Ye may call yerself a man, but yer as full o' windy talk as a child in the schoolroom. Fortunes ain't made by talk——"

"You might at least throw a sprat to catch a mackerel!" said Matthew, hardened by disappointment.

"Eh?"

"What's a hundred and fifty pounds a year to you, grandfather?" He thought, but felt it were better not to say, that Hercules would risk twice the amount on a game of hazard.

"And what is it to you?" came back the old man angrily.

"A—a nucleus, if you like to call it that! The crust, or rock, or bit of wood, round which the bee builds its cells, that it presently fills with honey——!"

Hercules had ceased to scowl, and all the gross flesh of his face was shaking, as with suppressed amusement.

A pretty comparison!—but yer natural history's at fault, my boy. Yer a male, Matthew, a male, an' 'tisin't the male bee that fills the hive! Go out an' find yer queen, an' come talkin' honeypots to me—if ye like!"

The upshot of the conversation was, however, a partial victory for Matthew.

He was sent, not to his uncle, but to the London branch of the firm, there to be initiated into the principles of the timber trade by Jason's representative. He was, by his uncle's instructions, to receive a pound a week and no sort of preferential treatment to distinguish him from the other clerks. To the contrary: a particular strictness was enjoined upon the heads of the departments, in regard to the owner's grandson.

That this disposal of his immediate future came, for reasons that will appear hereafter, to a bad end, was no fault of Hercules; indeed, by his subsequent concession of the pittance upon which, in those days, a young bachelor could fairly easily support himself, he implied the sympathy which his words denied.

Among his papers Matthew preserved, with a sentiment not a few charmers would have given much to arouse, the last letter the old man had ever written him. It was characteristic of Matthew coldbloodedly to destroy *billets doux* but to cherish an epistle far from flattering to himself, because it came from one to whom, since childhood, he had dedicated an emotion which he sometimes suspected was love.

"By this same despatch," wrote Hercules,

"—I am writing Mr. Rankin to pay you whatever arrears of Salary may be due to you, & to Dismiss you from ye Firm. I do this with ye full Concurrence of yr uncle Jason. And since it pleases you to Consider yrself a Man, you shall assume ye Responsibilities & Burthens proper to a man's Estate. It seems that this is likely to cost me less than ye Prospect which I see clearly before me, of paying for ye Extravagances & Indiscretions which you may Commit in ye Process of Attaining to manhood. You will therefore call upon ye Bank in Cheapside, where you will find an order for ye sum of twenty Six pounds Sterling, being ye First quarter's payment of One Hundred and Four Pounds which I shall allow you on act of yr father's legacy, the Same to be deducted from monies due to you on Attaining yr majority. In agreement to which you shall Affix yr signature to ye bond prepared by my Friend mr Kerridge of ye Bank: ye sole Condition being that You shall as from Date of signature absolve all Members of ye Family any further contributions to yr Support save such as we may Chuse in emergency to Bestow of our own free will. And in Conclusion I exhort you to live decently and Soberly within yr means, not regarding These as an Excuse for Idleness but as Encouragement towards whatsoever Venture promises Success in yr Judgment though I have small Respect for that at present writing. And If at any date of ye Future you shd desire to

return to Bristol, it wd be advisable in advance to Communicate with yr uncle or myself as ye Openings are few save for Such as are Highly recommended and I am not one to Recommend my Flesh & Blood unless I am worthily Convinced of their fitness for such Position as I may chuse to Offer them."

III

Shortly after being dismissed from the London branch—which he left with the determination never again, in any circumstances, to be an underling—Matthew managed, by astute manipulation of the name of Flood, to obtain certain credits that enabled him to gamble in commodities which, at the time, spelt profit, when properly handled. Thanks to the fact that no one ever suspected that the handsome young broker was a minor—had, in fact, barely reached his seventeenth birthday—and much assisted by his patronymic, which stood him in excellent stead among people who had no means of knowing that he had severed his connection with his family—Matthew made a promising début in commerce, and for some time bade fair to fulfil his proud boast of "being worth fifty times a hundred and fifty" by the time he reached his majority.

Unhappily, he had a dual inheritance to contend with. His mother's people were feckless, light-headed gentlefolk, and it was undoubtedly their blood that adulterated the steady stream of Flood tradition. Inordinately vain, he fell victim to the flattery of superiors who, attracted by his physical no less than by his social gifts, gradually absorbed him into raffish circles that suited his temperament better than the sober one of the city.

Though not yet in his twenties, Matthew Flood had an air of maturity which, allied to swashbuckling handsomeness, distinguished him in the company he now frequented. It was not—let the truth be told—edifying company: consisting for the most part of rakish young men, with more money than good taste, and more time on their hands than is conducive to the cultivation of wholesome accomplishments. Heroes of the cockpit, the coulisses and the card-table, their boastfulness was borne out but seldom by their achievements; Matthew despised them, but, having the choice between serving in heaven and reigning in a restricted but not unamusing hell, selected the latter, in deference to a nature which, gluttonous for authority, was too often defeated for lack of those trappings which authority connotes.

His looks were of the kind that coarsens with age; by the time he had reached his middle twenties—that is to say, when this history begins—there was a thickening at the base of the short, triangular nose, on either side of which deep folds of sallow flesh descended to the corners of a broad, flat-lipped mouth, whose jutting underlip betrayed self-will and self-indulgence. But that the sallowness was due to natural pigmentation, and not to dissipated habits, was proved by the startling whiteness of the globe upon which rode a dark and arrogant eye, well set in beneath its jutting thatch of black brow; by the even row of white teeth that flashed on the rare occasions of his smile, and by the steadiness of a scrupulously manicured hand that employed itself something too often in scattering dice on its own or his acquaintances' tables.

In order to cope with the demands of his new environment, Matthew had started wildly to gamble. He gambled in cash and in kind, and by the time he was twenty-one, found his affairs in such a tangle that it would have defied a mathematician to straighten them.

He was sorely tempted to take his grandfather's remembered advice, and to seek in a rich marriage the solution of his problems; but soon made the discovery that, of the lovely heiresses who had condescended to flirt with the handsome young *parvenu*, the more desirable had higher ambitions, when it came to the serious question of marriage: while the sillier and more amenable were too well guarded by watchful relatives to fall victim to the adventurer. He could indeed have married several elderly widows, but the prospect horrified him—even though one was so infatuated that she threatened to take her life unless her darling, her adored Flood would have pity on her poor swooning heart, that yearned only to be clasped to his! The heart, unfortunately, was so sunk and cushioned in obstreperous flesh that Matthew doubted whether even his long arms could have encompassed the casket that contained it. He could, without doubt, have made capital out of such devotion, for the lady's moneybags were as accessible as her heart to her adored one; but of the many dubious procedures to which, during this awkward period, Matthew was forced to lend himself, he found it impossible to stoop so low as to make money out of a silly woman.

He had likewise reached a point of disgust at his tinselly and unbalanced existence, so much at variance with the traditions of his family. It piqued his pride, to compare his life of an opportunist with that of the young men with whom he associated: men who, however negligible they might be in mentality or morals, revealed by their very follies their consciousness of belonging to a class which regards itself as above criticism; who had their names, their palatial dwellings, their possessions to lend substance to their trivial personalities.

Matthew had worked his Flood background threadbare; it was of little value in the society he now frequented, whose ears, attuned to the syllables of Debrett, were deaf to those of the commercial register. The name of Merlyn, he was mortified to discover, made even less impression; the Merlyns, West Country gentlefolk, were too obscure for their names to have penetrated the glittering London circle.

At the end of five years, Matthew, outwardly complaisant, inwardly enraged, knew himself still an outsider, and his gorge rose. His gambling exploits, his exhibitionistic style in behaviour and personal adornment, his affairs with women became more spectacular, more reckless and tasteless than ever; it was as though he were determined to compel their attention by his follies, since he could not command it by his status.

He had thought, not a few times, of applying for a commission in the army; from many points of view it seemed the obvious course, in that it would not only free him from some of his embarrassments, but would provide an outlet for the restless energy, for the stone-cold, unimaginative courage that he undoubtedly possessed. His qualities of leadership would have made a fine officer, whose men would have followed him to the devil. An army career, however, was the last towards which Matthew aspired; apart from the fact that regimental society bored him, the sheer destructiveness and obstructivism

of war made him angry and impatient. War meant the suspension of all financial activities apart from those immediately connected with war itself; and he now had the mortification of realizing that he had frivelled away many opportunities of regaining the financial equilibrium that he had sacrificed to a life of pretension and folly. He was spoken of openly as an adventurer; the more fastidious doors were closed upon him; and it seemed as though luck had finally deserted him, when his creditors, uniting to make an end of a highly unsatisfactory state of affairs, decided to call his bluff, and obliged him to make a bolt for freedom.

IV

To ride a hundred miles—the last twelve on a lame horse: to put one's last ounce of effort into easing the poor beast's stumbling progress up the hill that forms the mile-long climax to the journey: and to arrive at a blind house, whose shuttered windows offer no welcome to the traveller—this is not an encouraging beginning.

But, he reminded himself, he had not expected encouragement. Hercules, who possessed sources of information in every part of the country and walk of society, could not fail to have had reports of his grandson's goings-on—reports which would not help to oil the wheels of reconciliation. It was a last and desperate resource, to which Matthew was determined to bring all his powers of persuasion and, if necessary, of pleading. Surely the old man's pride, if not his sympathies, would not allow him to see his grandson clapped into a debtor's prison?

Nothing but optimism of a high order—and he despised optimists—could conjure a welcome from those supercilious Palladian arches, that temple-like frontal, with its pillared porch advancing above the semicircular flight of steps whence receded a green cascade of turf that poured, like water from a spring, from the mound on which Hercules Flood had chosen to erect his monument to commercial fame.

He was pleased to find that his original impression had been correct; he had feared a little that the golden vision of youth might have betrayed him—that the mansion of his forefathers might prove, on later acquaintance, no more than a comfortable little Georgian manor, perched on its grassy hillock above the busy port. Since those days his eye had adjusted itself to grandeur, his provincial *naïveté* acquired the perspective of experience. It therefore gratified him to receive this confirmation of his childish memories, and to recognize, in this place of his origins, which he had long since learned to dismiss with a deprecating smile, true cause for pride.

Only its silence puzzled him. Each window sealed, the inner shutters frustrated the curious eye that might seek some view of that interior whose privacy seemed so stubbornly to be preserved by its owner. The great front door, broad and square, with its dignified embellishments of knocker and handle, was frosted at the edges with a thin tracery of spiders' webs, which suggested that the occupants' absence was not that of a day, or a week. Was Hercules travelling—on business? It could hardly, in the case of a gout-ridden man, overburdened with all the dire results of self-indulgence, be for pleasure.

The possibility of his grandfather's death crossed Matthew's mind, only to be dismissed. An event like that could not have failed to come to his notice, even in London, even in those fashionable circles to which the old man would have scorned *entrée*. Too many interests were involved, indirectly or otherwise, with those of Hercules Flood; his finger was in too many pies—frequently in those of persons who had never seen him, but to whom his name stood for a signpost in the mysteriously complicated world of finance.

In the stable yard grass sprouted thickly between the cobbles. Having tried the doors and found them locked, Matthew was obliged regretfully to tether the mare beside the drinking trough, from which he cleared the scum before pumping in sufficient water to allow her to slake her thirst without danger of over-drinking.

Pressing his face to the dust-covered window of the coach house, he was just able, in its dim recesses, to make out an object that stabbed him with a pang of childish memory.

It had taken three men to hoist Hercules Flood into the great, broad coach which had been specially fashioned to accommodate his bulk, and, which, like most objects of its period, had a leisured grace of its own. One might liken it to an opulent cradle, rocking on its vast springs; an orange clove in profile reproduces that traumatic curve—or the young May moon, laid on her back. That grand, moon-shaped coach was well known in Bristol, in the first half of the eighteenth century, with its two fat bays, whose sides shone no less brilliantly than the lacquered chestnut panels: with its dangling fringes of bright blue worsted that set off to perfection the "gentlemanly" discretion of the liveries. It was an age of affluence; Bristol merchants did themselves well. Peering at this object of his childish admiration, Matthew recalled a scene that had never failed to fill him with mischievous delight.

A man at each side and one behind laboured with sweating brows at a task which required, not merely muscular effort, but the finikin handling one might accord a butterfly—or a valuable grub, cocooned in cottonwool. A chance tap of a monstrously swollen hand against the woodwork, a too ardent grip upon a wincing arm, and the tiger-roar of a perpetually suffering man would, by creating panic, precipitate the very tragedy each strove to avert. The man at the back had the best of it: he had but to thrust at an immense posterior—increased by the buckram-reinforced skirts of a coat richly but soberly encrusted with its galloon braiding—while his unluckier comrades supported the gargantuan weight until the swollen feet, which, in their buckled shoes, groped with the queasiness of the martyr for their footing, established themselves sufficiently to give their owner purchase for the final struggle.

"Don't hurry, father, I beg," uncle Jason was saying with his usual ill-judged commiseration—through the farther window. He always avoided the business of helping his parent into the coach; let menials bear the brunt of the old man's distempers! He fussed with the thick, Turk's-headed malacca and the sable muff, ready to present them, with an assiduous gesture, as soon as Hercules had settled down.

With a heave that brought the struggle to its climax, Hercules succeeded in presenting his stern to the seat he favoured—back to the horses—and let himself drop with a thud that set the springs swinging and creaking, and drew a phlegmatic start from the fat bays. The helpers withdrew, mopping

their dripping brows, while the grinning negro, Hercules' personal attendant, distributed the coppers which, translated into pints of ale, were the recognized reward for their labours. Uncle Jason waited, tactfully, while the old man's flesh settled about him, while the grunts and groans of outraged adipose subsided into the incoherent rumblings of chronic discontent.

It was the close of a scene which had always left little Matthew slightly disappointed, as though cheated of some hardly formulated climax to his expectations. The adult Matthew had the same sense of disappointment, as he withdrew his eye from the dusty pane, and, filled with an unreasonable melancholy for bygone days, turned towards the grounds.

Yes, the place was undoubtedly deserted: though the long, tufted grass which had risen over the once immaculate lawns showed signs of reaping by an unskilful hand; the walks were thick with weeds. A shrubbery had overrun its confines and encroached upon the flower-garden, and the rosery was a tangled thicket, whose every twig and branch was dewed with the sad rain.

Matthew started to limp round to the back of the house, gazing curiously about him, and, little cause as the circumstances of his upbringing had given him for sentimentality, felt another pang of reminiscence as he came upon a spot registered in his memory as "The Peep."

It was actually a small, curved balcony, or terrace, built out over the falling ground, and commanding a view of the Gloucestershire and Somerset heights at whose feet wound the river that brought the town its fortune. Suddenly, like a ghost, there rose before Matthew the figure of old Hercules, who, although bloated and crippled with gout, would insist upon hobbling to his terrace, from which he looked down upon that silver confluence of waters, Avon and Frome, whereon rode in majesty the argosies whose timbers his yards had supplied. Through his spy-glass, jealously, he could observe how his stout masts carried their tackle, could gauge the seaworthiness of the great curved shells in which the credit of his house was deeply involved.

Suddenly, for lack of that familiar figure, the scene seemed very empty; a chill descended upon Matthew, an angry impatience to know the meaning of this dereliction. Turning to look at the house, he saw a single window unshuttered, upon the first floor, and remembered it as the window of his grandfather's bedroom.

The shock of discovering that he had not the old tyrant of former years to deal with, but a man sick to death and struggling pitifully against a form of tyranny more dire than any he himself had exercised—the tyranny of contaminated and mortifying flesh—so startled Matthew as for the moment to make him oblivious of his own interests. A gush of feeling drove the blood to his temples, as he looked down upon a head and torso that reminded him faintly of his grandfather, or, rather, of a hideous caricature of the man he remembered as handsome in his fashion of a dissolute Roman emperor. He stood speechlessly, while the dim eyes focused, and a look of incredulity dawned in the sodden features.

"How came ye here?"

It was the identical greeting of the day when Matthew smoked his first pipe of tobacco, and it dispelled the painful tension of the scene. With a laugh of heart-felt relief, he sprang forward to seize his grandfather's hand.

"It's for me to ask, how came you here?" he jested. "Pouah! The room's like a furnace. Have they nailed up the windows, to prevent your escaping down the gutter?"

Hercules took no notice of this sally; his bleared eyes, dim with cataract, fixed with an almost terrifying concentration, his jaw and lips worked painfully to pronounce the next sentence.

"They said you was drowned at sea."

Once more taken aback, Matthew paused, before saying gently:

"That was James, grandfather. James—my father. I'm Matthew. Don't you remember? Matthew—James's son."

There was another long pause, before Hercules spoke again. God knows what efforts of memory took place in that exhausted brain before it gave up the clue on which the rest of their conversation depended. At last—

"I said ye'd come to a bad end," mumbled Hercules.

Matthew sat down, just as he was, in clothes stiff with the mud and dirt of his journey, and applied himself to the task of rousing and cheering his grandfather. For to-night, at least, there was no need to obtrude disagreeable and embarrassing subjects into the conversation! He calculated upon at least three days' start of his creditors who, when they discovered the bird had flown, would soon pick up the scent and trail him to his native town.

"Where's your pipe, grandfather? Upon my soul, I hardly know you without a pipe in your mouth!"

As though floodgates were opened, profanity broke forth at the reminder; and, if the gush were weaker, it was no less varied and prolonged than in the old days. Matthew slapped his thigh with appreciation for the performance.

"By God, I never met a man could swear like you! They tell me I have a modest ability, but I'm not likely to be puffed up, having such an example before me. So Jason's been trying to convert you, has he? The pious humbug! We'll put a stop to that."

Presently he went around the house, attended gleefully by Africa, whose joy and relief at the reappearance of his master's grandson had rendered him at first almost incoherent. The two servants who remained of Hercules' lordly staff, to be bullied by Ann Flood and terrorized into carrying out her instructions, had managed to send for the negro, who came running in incredulous delight. His black skin had lost its gloss, and was grey, as though dust had been sprinkled over it; the iron-grey of his hair and the bloodshot ochre of the eyeballs told their unhappy tale to Matthew, who cursed Jason for not even having so much care for the credit of their house as not to let a negro starve.

"Mars' Matthew. It don't never be Mars' Matthew?" he faltered. His trembling hand went up to his neck, which stuck out of the tattered shirt like a tortoise's, to finger the welded iron ring on which was inscribed his ownership: "This negro is the property of Hercules Flood, Esquire, of Bristol." Doubt blazed into certainty. "Mars' Matthew, it be sho'ly you!"

"Where the devil have you been? And what sort of a nigger are you, to desert your sick master?" snapped Matthew, resentful of his own emotion.

"Dey wouldn't keep me, Mars' Matthew! Mars' Jason don't hold with niggers, and Mars' Hercules, him too sick for to stand up for me!" The man's knees were jiggling with excitement; despite the doleful tale he had to tell, his face was irradiated with joy at Matthew's reappearance.

"Then who's been keeping you?" persisted Matthew. It was less perturbation about Africa's condition, than that he sought every shred of evidence to convict Jason of the monstrous neglect of his duties. He licked his lips at the prospect of the reckoning with his uncle, later on.

"Nobuddy done keep me, Mars' Matthew. I Mars' Hercules' nigger, ain' nobuddy's business."

"Where've you been sleeping?"

"I slep' in de stables fo' a while, den Mars' Jason done lockum up, so I slep' in old Roderick's kennel and it sho' am starvatiuous on cold nights!"

"What about your food—where do you go for that?"

"Dey still is plenty roots in de groun' . . . And how is yo', Mars' Matthew?" Africa's face, like a skeleton draped in cobweb, was split in half by his beaming smile. All the time he was making little, uncontrollable movements towards Matthew, like a dog half-insane with joy at the return of his master, yet not quite daring to give full expression to his joy for fear there might be some mistake. "Has yo' made yo' forchun, Mars' Matthew? Dat's what I kep' on saying to Mars' Hercules: 'Mars' Matthew sho' is making his forchun'—I kep' on saying it, Mars' Matthew!"

"And what did he say to that?" Matthew grinned sourly.

"Said I wuz a dam'fool half-wit nigger—dat's jes' Mars' Hercules' way," explained Africa anxiously, as though Matthew might have forgotten his grandfather's habitual phraseology.

"Yes, he's got a deuced unpleasant way of being right, every time. I've made no fortune; I'm broke; I haven't a cent—get that into your skull," said Matthew. "Can you look after my horse? She's gone lame in the off foreleg and her belly must be as empty as my own. Tell them in the kitchen to get me some food, to light some fires—and to let air into the house. Why the devil's the whole place shuttered up—as though grandfather were dead?"

"That wuz the mistress's orders, Mars' Matthew——"

Matthew's heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"There is no mistress here, and, until grandfather is better, you will take me as your master. Bring me the keys—and go and get into your livery! A fine sight you are to be a gentleman's negro!"

Matthew's success, no less than his methods, in rousing his grandfather furnished an unpleasant shock to Jason and Ann Flood, when they came on their pious daily visit, towards dusk, when Jason left the works. Ann Flood had not only assumed control of her father-in-law's household since his sickness began; she had locked up the wine cellar and forbidden the servants on pain of instant dismissal to supply their master either with alcohol or tobacco. A smothered shriek of astonishment and disgust signalled her entrance into a room filled with tobacco smoke, in which Hercules and his grandson were amicably reviving the past over a bottle of port. Jason, wiser, silenced her with a frown as he went forward and held out a limp hand to his nephew.

"Well, this is a surprise——" A most unwelcome surprise, one might gather, from the acidulous twist of his lips.

"The very devil of a surprise, isn't it, uncle?" said Matthew grimly. "God, you've neither of you changed an inch. One would say time stood still, in Bristol."

"It has very evidently not stood still with you," was the significant retort.

Ostensibly indifferent, Matthew boiled with indignation as he observed the airs of patronizing authority they both assumed towards his grandfather. Ignoring her nephew, Ann Flood sat down and, producing a Bible and spectacles from her reticule, fulfilled what was obviously a daily rite, in reading aloud a portion of the Scriptures to Hercules. Expecting an explosion, Matthew was tickled to see the old man lying back on his pillows, calmly smoking his pipe. Catching his grandson's eye, Hercules lowered an eyelid. Matthew thought delightedly, "There's plenty of life in the old boy yet!" And, as Ann Flood's dreary voice droned on, there was born in his mind the audacious scheme for Hercules' amusement that was to be put into effect—with such dire results—on the following night.

"I hope you will meditate on those words, father," said Ann, as she snapped to the leaves of her Bible, to Jason's nasal Amen.

"Ay, I'm more likely to meditate with me pipe in me mouth than I am when yer impident meddlin' deprives me of it," grunted Hercules.

Ann caught Jason's eye, and the latter shrugged his shoulders slightly. It was obviously impossible to order Matthew out of the house, in which he had established himself with such assurance. Thinking that he would consult his lawyer on the matter to-morrow (he had forgotten it was Sunday), Jason bade the confederates a cold good-night and accepted, without comment, Africa's grinning escort to the front door. He spent the journey home in assuring his flustered wife that, with Clay's assistance, there would be little difficulty in removing this unwelcome poacher on the family preserves.

V

To do Matthew justice, it was not until the morning after the tragedy that he began to reflect that he had by his foolish conduct, not only hastened his grandfather's death, but had forfeited his last chance of escape.

There was now nothing for it but to surrender to his creditors, or, alternatively, to flee the country. It crossed his mind to wonder if there might be a hope that his grandfather had previously relented, to the extent of some small legacy that could be used to stave off disaster. It would, perhaps, be wise to wait for the reading of the will, and, if his creditors arrived, to appeal to their decency and respect for the dead to allow him to remain at large until the funeral was over.

Meanwhile, his position was ticklish; his flight to Bristol had exhausted the last sovereign he possessed in the world, and he had but a handful of small change to see him over the time which must elapse before the tremendous pomps and ceremonies of the obsequies took place! There was nothing for it but to dig in his heels, to resist all possible attempts of Jason to oust him from his present lodging until the funeral was over, and to exercise his brain over some possible solution of the situation if the hope he hardly dared to cherish proved vain.

CHAPTER IV

I

"Is it true that Matthew Flood has come back?" inquired Lydia Burmester of her husband, on the morning of the scandal: to be instantly reproached by her daughter Orabella.

"Oh, Mama, haven't we told you? Clara Peddy assures us——"

"He is back," said Ralph Burmester, cutting shortly into his daughter's protest.

"It is a sad homecoming," observed Lydia, in her gentle, abstracted voice, that reduced all subjects to an equal level of unimportance. It was the voice she would employ for an earthquake, for a butterfly caught in a net, for an event of national significance, or for a new petticoat; it proceeded from some calm, philosophic depth of her being that had never known disturbance. In these days she would be called a fatalist; in those, the term had not been invented. "The house must be melancholy, for a young man. With such old friends as ourselves, there's surely no need to observe the conventions? Why do you not ask him to dine?"

Ralph cast a quick look at his daughters, and then at his wife; she returned it as calmly as though she were blind, and it struck him, not for the first time, to wonder if she were sufficiently aware of her responsibilities as mother of two beautiful and high-spirited girls.

"Oh, do—do, Papa!" pressed Orabella. "I should so like to see what Matthew has grown into. He was such a funny, dull boy!"

Ralph frowned.

"We shall see. And now, if you please, I wish to speak to Pallas. Will you come to my room, my child?"

The elder girl rose, and it was as though a young tree soared upwards—so tall, for those days, was Miss Pallas, in her India muslin gown, whose tiny, rust-coloured pattern ran like a covey of ladybirds into the snowy valleys of flounce and fluting. Her hair, of that warm, chestnut-red that accompanies, as surely as flowers the spring, clear, sea-coloured eyes and a complexion of radiant pallor, was drawn by a dark green scarf away from the lovely face, whose humour was no less marked than its dignity. It was too early in the morning for the ladies of the household to have assumed their hoops, and the soft material of her negligée was moulded into classic grace by her free young limbs.

"I am always at your disposal, Papa," she said, as she linked her arm into his, "but I hope you do not need to scold me this morning, for I am in a terrible bad mood for scolding!"

"Now, Pally," said Ralph, as he closed the study door upon them, "you know you are getting altogether too much of a great girl to be scolded."

"I am entirely of your opinion, Papa! And am I right in presuming that, if there were more gallantry in the opposite sex, the occasion for it wouldn't

arise?" She stood playing with a curtain rope, her head on one side, her charming lips curved in a smile of shrewdness and amusement.

"Egad, it isn't lack of gallantry that you should complain of, miss!"

"Indeed it is, Papa! Forgive me for contradicting you, but there's gallantry and gallantry. I don't give a snap of my fingers for all the pretty speeches in the world, if their inventor goes snivelling to my Papa that I've treated him monstrous unfairly," was the spirited response.

"Well, have you not?"

"I don't understand. Politeness obliges me to make myself agreeable to people who sometimes bore me until I could cry! I wonder, Papa, if you've ever noticed that I'm—intelligent?"

Ralph could not help smiling.

"Remember, Pally, that too much intelligence is not becoming in a woman."

"Well," said Pallas, having thought it over, "you cannot expect me to take seriously people who treat me like a doll; who have no interest in me, excepting for my hair, my hands, my shoulders, or some such accidental matter to which, to be sure, I pay some attention, but which I don't want to be reminded of every time I open my mouth. I know it is the fashion to treat women so—but it is a fashion which will not do for me!" Looking at his daughter's high, imperious head, Ralph could well believe it. Pally was certainly born for better things than marriage to some West-country bumpkin who would not know how to appreciate the rare qualities that were hers; but since "better things" did not offer, she would have to pitch her tune to a lower note, or remain permanently on his hands—a future which, not for his own sake, but for hers, Ralph refused to contemplate.

"Papa, if you can believe it——! I was talking to Charles Gosselin for nearly half an hour yesterday, about Mr. Swift's lovely poem, *Windsor Forest*; you know he fancies himself a great naturalist, so I thought he would surely be interested to hear how vividly a poet, even if he be not a professor of natural science, can describe the pheasant.

" ' Ah! what avail his glossy, varying dyes,
His purple crest and scarlet-circled eyes,
The vivid green his shining plumes unfold,
His painted wings and breast that flames with gold?'

"And what do you think the great fool said when I'd finished? 'Is that not beautiful?' I asked him, and he answered, 'I cannot tell; for when you speak I only hear the beauty in your voice.'"

"You must not be too hard upon our unfortunate sex, Pally. And if you do not take care, you will get yourself the reputation of a heartless flirt. It is absurd, at your age, that you are not married; and, let me tell you, your mother and I are finely criticized for the way we allow you to do as you please in this matter of your own freedom."

"Darling Papa! You and Mama are the most exceptional and perfect of parents. But you must not be puffed up about it!" she had the impudence to add, "Because, if every one else is stupid, and you are not, it does not mean anything very much; but if all the world were full of intelligent people, and you were the shining stars amid the assembly, it would mean a very great deal!"

Dear, sweet Papa, of course you and Mama would never dream of bullying me into a marriage, because you are so much more sensible than all these foolish people——” There was a hint of breathlessness, even of apprehension, in her voice, all the same; the eyes which looked into his were not devoid of a faint anxiety, which Ralph turned his head away sharply to avoid.

“That is all very well, Pally; but it is a state of affairs of which, in my opinion, you have taken too much advantage; and which cannot be allowed to continue.”

The severity of his tone quenched her high spirits; it was several moments before, pressing the palms of her hands together, she replied, very quietly:

“I would be prepared to marry to-morrow, if you would find for me the right person. I can imagine nothing more dreadful than to live with a person to whom you cannot tell everything, in confidence of their sympathy and understanding: who does not accord to you the same confidence you give to him. When I find a husband, I would want to share every interest in his life, and to give him full share in mine. I want to be treated, not only as a housekeeper, or a childbearer, but as the true partner in his thoughts, and as a person entitled to thoughts and opinions of my own. Perhaps I aspire too far; but I’m sure that such a relationship exists—even between men and women; and I’d rather die an old maid than put up with a substitute!”

“You are talking for effect,” said Ralph, losing his temper. “It is the fashion among pretty young women to swear that they’d sooner die old maids than forfeit some foolish figure of fancy born in their idle imaginations. But it is time for you to recognize the responsibilities proper to your sex and station.”

“What may those be, Papa?” asked Pallas, with a dangerous demureness. “For it seems to me that, if a woman is obliged to assume responsibilities, she should be offered some compensation in return! And I’m sure that women of the future won’t put up with the treatment some of them receive to-day—not for all the compensation in the world!”

“Pally, if you don’t take care, you will end by making me seriously angry,” said Ralph. “What compensation can a woman require, pray, more than the comforts and luxuries a husband provides her with?”

“Correct me if I am wrong, Papa—and, of course, on this subject I am not so very well informed—but I am persuaded that bearing children is not so very luxurious a process, from a woman’s point of view.”

“It is a woman’s natural vocation!” roared Ralph. “And if you, now, miss, were at your proper task of rearing a new generation, you would have the less time to spare in quibbling over questions your husband would decide for you.”

“I am the worst of fools to annoy him,” Pallas thought, as she found herself alone. “Dear, good Papa—who has never plagued me, the way other girls are plagued by their fathers, and has never been anything but the soul of patience with all my whims.” She took out of the workbag which, at her father’s summons, she had looped over her arm, the piece of silk she was stitching into some conceit for Lydia’s birthday, and, with a philosophical air, threaded a magenta strand into her needle.

●

II

"Oh, Pally—Pally!"—both bag and embroidery were snatched away, the first hurled into a corner, the second stretched like a canopy over Orabella's head, as she danced about the room, enchanting as a figure from a Grecian urn. "Oh, Pally!" She stopped to draw breath. "How can you be so prim as to get on with your stitching—with thousands of things happening and so much excitement in the air——? And you needn't pretend that you aren't ready to jump out of your skin at the mere idea of Matthew's coming to dine——!"

"If you were not rising sixteen," observed Pallas, unable to prevent the colour from rising to her lower eyelids, as she followed her sister back to the parlour, "I should slap you. Why should I be so foolish—considering that every night, more or less, there are gentlemen to dinner——?" which was true, the Burmesters being one of the few Bristol families who, at that time, entertained on a generous scale in their own homes.

"Why indeed!" Saucy Miss Orabella was twisting the embroidery into a turban for her curls of ripe corn. "Oh, I know you, Pally! You haven't quite the sagacity of the goddess for whom you were christened. Pallas Athene, goddess of wisdom. I bet she knew more than give herself away the way you've done, these last few hours!"

"Orabella!"

Smitten with contrition, the younger girl ran to fling her arms about her sister's waist.

"Forgive me, dear, dearest Pallas!—'twas vulgar of me, but I meant no harm. And it's all so romantic, my heart's in a flutter already—feel!" Seizing Pallas's hand, she pressed it over her soft, immature breast. "Is yours like that?" Bending her head, she laid it to her sister's bosom.

"You're—you're crazy!" cried Pallas, thrusting her away, and turning hurriedly towards the fire. Picking up a screen, she made heat the pretext for shadowing her face.

Orabella stood still, her hands linked together, her feet in their heelless satin slippers pressed side to side, like a child reciting a lesson.

"So that's why you kept the little musical box!—and why, instead of throwing the broken pieces away, you had them made into a pin for your gown. I guessed it, when you made such a fuss last week—when you as good as accused poor Betty of stealing a thing not worth more than a few pence. I thought, 'That's not like Pally!—who'd sooner go to jail herself than get any one into trouble.' And when it was found, where it had slipped down at the back of the drawer—oh, Pally, was there any need to dance with joy, and present Betty with a crown, to make up for your fault-finding? Had you to sing, and sparkle, and finger the thing throughout a whole morning——?"

"Your attentiveness to all that does not concern you is well-nigh intolerable at times, Orry!"

"Indeed it does concern me!" indignantly retorted Orabella. "It's not so agreeable, let me tell you, when one has left the schoolroom, to have a sister of twenty, still unmarried, about the house. How can I expect the fellows to regard me seriously, when you are here?"

Pallas's lips twitched involuntarily into a smile.

"I'm sure I am very sorry," she answered humbly. "And I will take pains to make myself more inconspicuous, when your admirers come to call."

"You know that is not what I mean." Orabella stamped her foot. "Dearest Pally! One might as well talk of the moon making herself inconspicuous, when you have only to sit, and every man who sees you falls madly in love with you. I did think, by the way, you might have taken Roger Furnivall; 'twasn't as if he were a Bristol man—oh, lud, I often despair for myself, when I look at these Bristol fellows, so uncouth, so stupid, so unwieldy in drawing-rooms——"

"It's very ungracious of you to talk like that about Bristol men," Pallas reproved her. "Especially as it doesn't prevent you from flirting with them! And, even if they are a little dull, they are the worthiest fellows in the world. I doubt if any town in Britain can show such a roll of heroes as ours, since the wars began." A faint—and wholly unintentional—note of patronage did not escape the sharp ear of Miss Orabella, and somewhat neutralized the moral effect of the speech.

"Oh-oh, I suppose that's why you've fallen in love with so many of them! Come, Pally, be honest: is it not true that a man may be a hero, and yet be the dullest bore that ever existed? The wars may have called out their courage, they certainly haven't improved their manners," pouted Orabella. "Nor their looks, if it comes to that! Oh dear, it looks as if there wouldn't be any whole men left, by the time I come to marry. I could never do like Herminia Bond: I vow I'd evaporate at the very thought of marrying a man with only one arm!"

"There's not a nobler nor more gallant man living than Sherlock Bond!" said Pallas indignantly. "And you should be ashamed of yourself, Orry, for talking so of our brave protectors. The more so, that your conduct does not bear out your words."

"Lud, we'll be reduced to flirting with the washing poles, if these horrid wars go on!" said the impenitent Orabella. "Actually, I'm very glad indeed you haven't fallen in love, Pally; for, knowing what you are, I'm quite sure you'd have married him, if he'd come back to you in pieces! You're just the sort of foolish, fond creature who'd have devoted her life to leading a blind man or a cripple about. Oh, damn—oh, damn the wars! It's bad enough not to be able to get any more of those lovely stuffs from France, without having all our admirers reduced to eyeshades and crutches, and hardly a soul to stand up with when it comes to a minuet. Of course, there's no point in denying that those who have stayed at home are not the ones one would choose to be seen with——"

"Come; either you must give me back my sewing, or I'll make you practise our duet. It's a perfect scandal, at this hour of the morning, to sit gossiping like a pair of old maids——"

Quickly Orabella turned, and flung her arms about her sister's knees.

"Pally, you can't deceive me. Oh, Pally, don't be so mean! Though I chatter a lot, you know I can be as secret as the grave. Only admit that you are even more thrilled than I by Matthew's return! That ever since he broke your musical box, that you wouldn't even allow me to touch—oh, Pally, I wouldn't have broken it!—you've thought of no one else, and that's why you've disappointed so many, and put Papa in so bad a temper——!"

Defeated, Pallas closed her eyes and put her hand to her brow. Her silence lasted so long that Orabella, a little frightened, crept to her side and crouched into the billows of her gown. At last, painfully—

"I—I do not even understand myself . . . not to have control . . ."

"I know what you mean." Quivering, yet taken aback by her victory, Orabella enclosed Pallas's hand shyly in her own. "'Tis almost terrifying, is it not, that, even in childhood, one is not immune from Cupid's darts? Oh, dearest Pally, to think of the years you have cherished your secret——!"

"It at least shows what folly the human mind is capable of!" Pallas forced a laugh.

"Suppose he has changed——? I hope you won't swoon when you meet him again," said Orabella anxiously.

"Indeed, I can promise you that! 'Tis not at all becoming for women of my type to swoon," said Pallas, with severity. "They would say it was a chimney coming down!"

"Oh, Pally, not a chimney! A lovely larch tree, perhaps——"

"And so far as that goes," went on Pallas, ignoring the flattering interruption, "I am quite prepared, at the first glance, to forfeit my illusions. I shall probably wonder whatever trick my fancy played, to weave such thoughts about a very commonplace individual! And now, if you please, Orry, we will not mention this again. I did not mean you to know about it. If you were not such a curious, spying little thing——!"

"Oh, I'm a horrid sister! But at least I adore my beautiful Pally, and care for nothing but her happiness. Lud! How I shall thrill when I see you two together——"

"Now remember, Orry! There must be no mischief—no sly glances and foolish remarks, such as I know you are quite capable of making."

"Indeed, I shall be the very pink of propriety! How could you think I should ever betray my darling Pally? But there will be no need of betrayal; 'twill all be settled, from the moment he claps eyes on you. Doesn't every man adore you? Didn't Sam Peddy, Joel Winter, Charles Blake and William Goffin practically come to blows over who should light you home from the Merchants' Ball?"

"You're talking like a little fool. Is it likely—I ask you, Orabella, is it *likely*—that a man who has had the run of London society should have eyes for a Bristol bumpkin?" For all her brave assumption of common sense, there was a touch of bitterness in the last words.

"Ah, now I know why you've been so black under the eyes and anxious-looking since Betty called you!" nodded the far too sagacious Orabella. "You needn't worry—a touch of ill-health becomes you. And if Mr. Matthew Flood considers that there is a woman in society who can hold a candle to my sister, I shall snap my fingers at him," she concluded staunchly.

"After that," said Pallas, rising, as a sign that the subject was closed, "you can hardly refuse to give me a shilling."

"Oh!" Lapsed upon the soles of her slippers, Orabella made a *moue* of discontent. "You're always plaguing me for a shilling, and I'm sure I'll need all I've got towards that hat we were both admiring, that's to go with my blue and gold Turkey sack! I suppose it's for one of your tiresome charities——"

"Just a little sixpence," pleaded Pallas. "I'm short nearly a crown of last

month's collection, and I can't abide to deprive the poor creatures of their needs."

"What poor creatures?" frowned Orabella.

"You heard Mr. Jason's appeal last night," Pallas reproached her.

"Why *do* you fuss yourself about negroes?" Orabella scrambled to her feet, shaking down her tumbled petticoats. "I'm sure you can't say people in Bristol treat their black servants badly; and I know I'd much sooner belong to a kind English master than live in a savage country where people do nothing but kill each other—not to speak of the creatures that bite and sting, and all the horrid diseases. Oh, it must be a *disgusting* country!"

"How would you like," cried Pallas, as, with her head in the air, Orabella began to walk away, "—how would you like to have an iron collar welded round your neck, with your owner's name upon it? 'This negro is the property of—of John Peddy, say, of the city of Bristol'?"

"I shouldn't object at all, provided the collar was of an agreeable pattern," perversely retorted Orabella, "and I only wish somebody would give me a little black boy, like Lady Gannet's Absalom, that I could dress up and make a pet of. I declare I could get as fond of him as of my long-haired kitten!" She turned sharply on her sister to add: "Has it ever struck you to wonder why Mama doesn't go to the anti-slavery lectures?"

"They don't interest her; you know Mama takes very little interest in anything outside the house."

"Nothing of the sort. If you ask my opinion," triumphantly said Orabella, "her reason for not going is something she knows about Papa. I shouldn't be in the least surprised if he has an interest in the slave trade. Every one in Bristol has!"

"Oh, no—it can't be that!" Pallas had whitened to the tender arches of her lips.

"Why not? Oh, don't be silly, Pally. Papa is a very rich man, and I'll bet you the shilling you're so anxious to get from me that it doesn't all come out of weaving. Everybody says the wool industry's going down, but we don't get any poorer. Who cares? Papa's at liberty to buy and sell all the slaves he likes, so long as I can get my Turkey gowns!"

"If I thought any gown of mine had come out of that infamous trade, I should rend it in pieces!"

"Then I advise you not to make too many inquiries!" was the pert rejoinder. "I'm sure you'd be as sorry to part with that pale-pink lutestring or your new yellow ball dress as I'd be to have no more opportunities for admiring you in them. Oh, don't, pray, dearest Pally, don't start to be a reformer! You're far too sweet and pretty to waste yourself on causes!"

There was no lightning of the cloud that had settled on Pallas's brow.

"I shall ask Papa."

Orabella cast a glance at her sister, and shrugged her shoulders.

"Ask away. I never met a person as little forthcoming as Papa, unless it suits him." With the sudden change of topic that so often disconcerted her listeners, she burst forth: "Take last night! I've begged and implored him to tell me what he knows—for I'm positive, aren't you, Pally, that he was at Hercules Flood's—but there's not a word to be had out of him. 'Tis too pro-

voking—with Clara Peddy already one up on me for gossip—when I might be a positive mine of information!”

Pallas's tight lips relaxed as she looked at the sister who, for all her follies and vanities, she adored. Surprised at the silence, Orabella turned round; their eyes met, and the next moment they were in each other's arms.

“I'll give you that shilling,” babbled Orabella, “if you'll promise not to mention slave trade for a week! And even if you insist on being a crazy phil—philan—oh, whatever the word is—I shall never cease to love you better than anybody in the world!”

III

“It is a barbarous town!” Matthew was thinking, as he threaded the narrow streets, with their overhanging signs that forced him, swearing, to duck his head a dozen times in a distance of fifty yards. Having nearly been brained by, successively, a “Turkish Bashaw,” a beehive, an elephant, a wheatsheaf and a Golden Boy, he was not disposed to appreciate his surroundings. “Keep off, you scum!” he roared at the driver of one of the sledges that brought the merchandise up from the quays, as the uncouth vehicle came lurching and skidding over the cobbles, scattering shrieking pedestrians into doorways and causing stampede among the animals—goats, sheep and swine—that meandered along the highway as though it were the village green.

Alert for pickpockets, he scanned the fulminating population—a pock-marked, shifty crowd, whose dubious faces showed every variety of pigmentation that accompanies mixed and foreign blood; conscious of them as he had never been in the old days, when, as a truant schoolboy, he had mixed with them, taking them as much for granted as he took the respectable tradesfolk behind the counters, and finding in them, God knew, more affinity than he found in his home circle.

He guessed that it was only his height, and the half-conscious menace of his bearing, that obtained for him wayroom among thugs prepared to risk their lives in assault upon a well-dressed stranger, for he caught many calculating glances that took in his metropolitan style, and communicated it, with nods and nudges, to neighbours.

It gratified him that, so far, none recognized him. There must indeed be a difference between Mr. Matthew Flood of London and the lout of bygone days. Now and again, usually from a woman, he got a puzzled look, a look of struggling memory, and turned hastily aside. He had no desire to be greeted by one of the molls whose former favours he had learned to despise.

Turning into the more respectable thoroughfare of Broad Street, he halted for a moment, out of idleness and curiosity, to read a bill posted on a wall.

“TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION AT LITTLE JOHN'S COFFEE HOUSE

On November 18th, 1760

The Full Articles Suitable for a Guinea Voyage, comprising

1 Iron Furnace & Copper, 27 Cases with

Bottles, 83 Paires of Shackles, 11 Neck
Collars, 22 Handcuffs for the Travelling
Chain, 54 Rings, 4 Travelling Chains,
1 Corn Mill, 7 4-Pound Basons, &c."

Always attracted by matters relative to the slave trade, Matthew read it with interest, speculating what this interesting lot would fetch. He was about to move on, when a vast figure, impeding his passage, caused him to step aside to make room for the lawyer Shergill. Matthew greeted him—not too warmly. Beyond the fact that he was an unwelcome reminder of the events of the previous night, he could hardly have said what disposed him against this crony of Hercules, who, in the broad light of day, presented a somewhat damaged and shifty appearance, despite the immaculacy of his ruffles and the costly elaboration of a broadcloth suit which, in quantity and quality of material, must have cost a fortune.

If Matthew was put out by meeting him, it was evident that his sentiments were not reciprocated, for Shergill stood still, leaning on the thick malacca that steadied his rolling progress, removing his hat with a flourish that might have been considered a trifle excessive from a man of his standing to a younger companion. Matthew was annoyed to perceive that their encounter had been observed and was causing a small sensation.

"Good-day to ye, sir!" Shergill was observing. "So you're taking a look round your native town! We've made advances, I'm glad to say, in the last few years." He said this very loudly, as though for the benefit of onlookers, at the same time giving Matthew a sly glance, as though to warn him from pandering to their curiosity. Already the vicinity was agog, for lawyer Shergill's name had been widely associated with Hercules' death.

Assuming unawareness of their interest, he peered across Matthew's shoulder at the bill on the wall.

"Oh, ay—int'restin'—very. 'Twould have interested me more a day or two ago."

"Do you dabble in the West African trade," asked Matthew carelessly. Shergill lowered his voice as he replied:

"The three of us—Jack Peddy, myself and your grandfather—we'd settled, before he was taken ill, to buy a fine snow you'll see in the harbour—if you take a stroll that way. 'Tis a pity the business was not concluded: there was haggling over the price, and—well, they've missed their sale, for I doubt Jack'll make up the third share and I've got too much tied up at present to sink another couple o' thousand."

"Perhaps you'll find another partner," Matthew suggested.

"Maybe, maybe, but money's tight just now, and——" Glancing across Matthew's shoulder, he drew him into a narrow gap between two houses, which they blocked with their broad figures. "The place is hummin' like a wasp's nest; 'tis unfortunate we encountered," he mumbled. "On the other hand, I was wanting to get hold of you. I'm sorry for you, me boy. 'Tis a wretched business." An oily palm fell on the back of Matthew's hand, which quickly avoided it. "As an old friend, if there's ought I can do, any little temp'ry embarrassment I can relieve, speak the word. For Hercules' sake, I'll be glad to serve you."

Matthew was astonished. It struck him at once that here was a way at least out of present difficulties; but he disliked the idea of taking this too-smiling and plausible person into his full confidence. He laughed shortly, to gain time.

"But this is monstrous amiable of you, Mr. Shergill! Indeed, I'm at a loss to know why you should be so accommodating. I warn you, there's no security I can offer——"

"Tt-tt-tt—no talk of security between friends. Now what do you want? Fifty pounds? A hundred? I've but a few guineas in my pocket at the moment, but you're welcome to 'em. Later on we can get together——"

"Well, since you insist . . . I have left my purse at home," lied Matthew, thinking rapidly, "and I was just cursing the necessity for tramping the long way back to Brandon Hill——"

"Help yourself," muttered the lawyer, holding out a handful of gold and silver under shadow of his coat-tails. With a murmur of thanks, Matthew did so—feeling that it was most extraordinary. In his experience, lawyers did not supply, they fleeced one of money. It amused him to wonder what sort of a reception he would have had from old Clay, the Flood attorney, if he had tried to borrow from him!

He could not avoid a feeling of uneasiness, as, having parted from Shergill, whose beams and winks and exaggerated courtesy of leave-taking seemed as absurd as they were uncalled-for, he continued on his way. He bit back an exclamation of impatience at the sight, ahead of and walking towards him, of Ralph Burmester, who had just turned into the main street on his way from the Tailors' Hall. It seemed as though it was impossible to escape reminders of the previous night.

The tall, dignified figure which, by displaying a black knot, reminded Matthew that he had not yet paid this tribute of respect to the dead, was, however, difficult to associate with that sorry scene. Ralph Burmester gravely doffed his hat; an expression of serious perturbation came into his face as he returned Matthew's greeting.

"I am sorry I was not at hand to lend you my assistance."

"You were well away," muttered Matthew. He felt shamed, and resented it.

Ralph Burmester appeared to hesitate.

"My wife——" he began, and cleared his throat. "My wife, whom doubtless you remember, bids me offer you hospitality to-night. She thinks you may find it distressing, alone at Triton Lodge."

Matthew ignored the cold form of the invitation, and his face lightened. As always, he looked much younger when he smiled, and there was something that even Burmester found pleasant in the eagerness with which he replied.

"That is very kind of Mrs. Burmester! Pray give her my compliments and say I am grateful to accept. How is she?—and the two little girls—Pally, wasn't it?—and Orry. They will have forgotten their clumsy playmate. I suppose they are quite big by now."

"My daughter Pallas is twenty," said Ralph Burmester stiffly. "And Orabella has just had her sixteenth birthday."

Matthew was startled into a laugh.

"Lud, sir, but that puts a different complexion on the matter! I fear I'm not equipped to grace such society. Having left town somewhat hastily, I have

with me only a meagre allowance of clean linen, and no sort of attire that is suitable for dining with ladies," he declared.

Ralph gave him a disapproving glance.

"Your bereavement will absolve you, in their eyes, of fashionable adornment. We dine at six; I shall be pleased to welcome you."

"Liar!" thought Matthew ironically, as, with the exchange of formal bows, the pair of them parted. "I've made no favourable impression in that quarter, at any rate. I wonder if he's friendly with Uncle Jason?" The two families must have had some acquaintance in the old days, since he had been invited to play with the Burmester children.

He remembered vaguely two pretty little girls, much younger than himself, with whom he was awkwardly shy—too conscious of the contrast between their fragile daintiness and his own hulking clumsiness of an overgrown school-boy to join in the games into which they tried to draw him. He remembered that the elder—that would be Pally—had come to him one day with a little painted box in her hands.

"There, Matthew, that is my new musical box; it plays three tunes. I won't allow Orry to touch it, for, being only a baby, she might easily spoil it. But you are such a great boy, you would do it no harm, would you?"

The touching gesture of confidence had, for the moment, conquered his shyness. Pally, so pretty, so serious, holding up her precious toy, brought the spontaneous smile to his sullen lips. The three tunes tinkled and the little girls danced, until, tiring of the thin, sweet music and the soft, unreal scene, delicate as a fan-painting on satin, and half-scared by his own share in it, Matthew suddenly ground the handle so furiously and at such a speed, it broke off in his hand. Aghast at what he had done—at Orabella's wail and Pally's wide eyes and parted lips of dismay—he lost his head completely. Dashing the box down on the flagged floor of the hall, he fled. He was never asked to the house again.

What a memory on which to renew an acquaintance! To a young lady of twenty he stood, pre-convicted, as a boor. That would take some living down—especially on the top of any gossip that might have reached her ears from London, where she probably had connections. Matthew's vanity—ever the most sensitive of his emotions—pricked him, and, half-seriously, half in jest, he began to cast about in his mind for some propitiatory offering that might cover the awkward moment of meeting.

"By Christmas! It is—can only be—Matthew Flood!"

The unseasonable oath, coupled with the unexpected utterance of his name, made Matthew spin on his heel.

The person who accosted him was nearly as tall as himself, fully as broad, and wore about the lower part of a face nearly as dark as Africa's a beard which flamed like an autumn bonfire in the midday sun.

There was something so outlandish about that combination of fiery beard and skin of weather-blackened bronze that Matthew found himself staring; it needed only the reek of tar and brine, and the wide, rolling gait that brought the stranger alongside like a barge settling athwart hawse a privateer to identify him as a sailor. He held out a hand the size of a ham, tattooed so heavily to the knuckles that it had, at first glance, the appearance of being mittened in


blue and crimson, and brought the other down with a clap on Matthew's shoulder that made the latter wince.

"By Christmas! It must be twelve year since we met!—but stab me if I'm mistaken in them black brows of yours, that's as good as a tradesman's sign to any one that seeks you. If ever you have need to hide, my cock, you must first shave off your brows!" The speaker burst out laughing. His bob wig was pushed away to the back of his head and left exposed a brow beaded with sweat and divided by the line of the wig itself into two equal strips, the lower dark, like the remainder of his face, and the upper light and ruddy, in conformance with the colouring of his beard.

The black brows drew together, for Matthew did not care to be taken at disadvantage.

"Then," he retorted, "if it is twelve years since we met, I take it you were not adorned with that scrubbing mop that hides your lower face! And if you wish me to recognize you, you must either visit a barber or give me your name."

"Abiathar Crown—damn your eyes! And I was the dunce and you the bright boy at Redcliff Grammar; and you got the prizes and I the punches," amplified the other, evidently in no way embittered by the reminiscence.



CHAPTER V

I

"So they turned you out of the company!" As Matthew evinced surprise at Crown's knowledge of his affairs, the latter chuckled. "And a good job for you, I'll be bound. I can think of less tejiuous jobs than selling timber." He gave a prodigious wink, which, owing to the lightness of his eyes, reminded Matthew of the blink of a watchman's lantern on a windy night. "You've got a fine, prosperous look about you!—more power to you. I take it you've made your fortune in London."

Matthew thought quickly. He could not keep up indefinitely the pretence that he was a person of affluence, and there was something that invited confidence in the honest naïveté of Crown, who stood nodding his head in amiable envy of his schoolfellow's success.

"What about yourself; I see you've taken to the water. Well, how does the life of a shipmaster please you?" He imagined he was paying a compliment, for it did not look as though Crown had risen to the command of a ship. Although he was not in the casual rig of a common sailor, his appearance was rough, even shabby. He wore an old, blue, full-bottomed coat, faded and weather-streaked; his small-clothes were deplorable—a mass of stains and grease spots, with a cobbled darn showing on the inside of a knee; his waistcoat was of poor material, threadbare in places, and lacked many buttons, and his coarse woollen stockings were wrinkled over clownish shoes of unpolished leather. Conscious of inspection, Crown shrugged a shoulder, as though to say, "What would you?"

"My outfit's a fair index to my condition," he admitted—not, Matthew noticed, denying the suggestion that he was a shipmaster. "I grant you, it's worse than it need be; the slut I live with, though she'll cook and bake for me at any hour of the day or night, avoids like poison laying hand to a needle. A master's job is like others: good when you're with the right people, and plaguy bad when luck's against you."

"Where can we drink?" asked Matthew. He was tired of the amount of interest his appearance aroused and a little ashamed of his shabby companion. They had arrived on the harbour, and here the river revealed itself as the life-impulse of the town, for it seemed as though at least two-thirds of the population were gathered between the sheds and the edge of the quays. Sober, well-dressed merchants, attended by their factors, rubbed shoulders with the less respectable personnel of the seaways, and swaggering naval officers in laced coats and cocked hats looked down their noses at the merchant skippers, whose shore-going kit, in many instances, gave mildewed evidence of long disuse.

The noise was deafening. Fishwives cried their ware in voices more cracked and raucous than any man's; a babel of foreign tongues striving against West Country accents increased confusion among the labourers who struggled with the cargoes, with handkerchiefs knotted round their brows and others supporting the breeches about their sweating hips. Although it was the month of

November, it was mild, humid weather; the midday sun that penetrated the almost imperceptible mist still had power to scorch the imperturbable mariners of the small river craft, who, anchored, seemingly, like the craft, to their bollards, added another layer to the brown lacquer that covered all the exposed parts of their flesh. There was a continual splatting of bare feet, plunging of hooves on cobbles worn to glass; a Jew hawked brass rings along the waterfront, that the artless seamen of the lower decks bought as "fine gold," and paid for accordingly; another offered "rich Turkey carpets" to more well-to-do-seeming landmen.

Some shabby employee of the theatre thrust into Matthew's hand a bill promising "a moonlight night and a Stupendous Galaxy of Talent at Jacob's Well!" A group of itinerant acrobats enterprisingly staged on the spot a performance for the amusement of the crew of a newly arrived cargo boat from Lisbon, seemingly unperturbed by the constant interruption of their act by vehicles whose swearing drivers cut at the tumblers with their whips. Matthew and Abiathar stood for a few moments looking on: Matthew half scornful, yet amused against his will by the ingenious performance. He had almost forgotten this aspect of Bristol, which had delighted him as a child.

Abiathar nudged his elbow, to draw his attention, as it passed, to a sorry procession of black figures that, newly risen from the bowels of the vessel that brought them, lurched as though blind and drunk, their limbs seemingly too weak to support the chain that linked them together.

Although there was no recognized slave market in Bristol, it was common for a dozen or more negroes to be auctioned at one of the coffee houses or taverns, where the young bloods congregated for the pleasure and distinction of securing a black servant, who, in nine cases out of ten, lived but a few months in that unaccustomed climate; and if a young female should happen to be included in the sale, the bidding waxed fast and furious, the ribaldry not less so, and the winner of this delectable prize was mightily chaffed by his envious companions.

Matthew felt an itching to go along and see the fun, but Abiathar was beckoning him into one of the taverns of the waterfront, where they were greeted by a thin, hard-bitten fellow with a scar at the corner of his eye, whom Matthew introduced as Captain Carfrew. This person—considerably better caparisoned than his colleague—had plenty to say about the pirates to whose attentions he owed the fact that he was shore-bound.

"By Jesus! One needs to be fitted like a line-o'-battle ship these days, with the riff-raff that's on the high seas," he swore. "The sooner the wars is over the better for all of us: for maybe then their lordships 'ull find time to send out an expedition to blow them plundering Turks and Moors to perdition—instead of spending the country's money in ransoms for their victims." He blew the froth off his tankard before continuing—Abiathar being preoccupied with the landlord—"There goes one of the finest fellows that ever took a ship across the Atlantic!"

Matthew was surprised. The ramshackle, half-stupid appearance of Abiathar had led him privately to the conclusion that the latter was probably himself to blame for his melancholy situation.

"There's no man living knows more than him about the handling of niggers; it's a kind of genius," Carfrew was muttering. "'Twas a flaming scandal the

way he was used at Liverpool—by them tight-fisted skinflints that blames everything but their own flaming stinginess for the way things went. Look 'ee here, Mr. What's-yer-name"—he shook an admonitory finger at Matthew—"if ever you take to slaving, here's a piece of advice for you: *trust your skipper*. He'll know a flaming sight more about it than you ever will, if you live to be a hundred."

Matthew could not help laughing at this serious warning.

"With all due respect to you, and thanks for the advice, I can think of nothing less likely than that I shall ever find myself in a position to interest myself in the slave trade," he said, with assumed carelessness.

The captain shook his head.

"It's surely a pity, for there's still a fortune to be had out of it. I've done little myself, for I've been with the privateers. Still, you never can tell—" He jerked up his elbow, to toast the imponderable future.

II

"I been up at Liverpool ten year or more," Abiathar explained, when Carfrew left them together "A fellow I met offered me his snow *Elizabeth* for the Guinea trip, and better money than I could get, just then, in Bristol. Well—I suppose it's a mistake to go grabbing for more than your due. . . .

"We lost her to the Portugee, and I thought myself lucky to get back to Liverpool. It was reg'lar sailing for a bit, but them Mersey screws—they'd pinch farthings out o' the poorbox!"

"Ay, they're close-fisted in Lancashire." Matthew spoke out of the depths of his own experience

"Close-fisted? They leave you to pay your own port charges an' primage, out o' fi' pun a month! What do you say to that? And a poorer, wretcheder lot than them Mersey skippers, poor devils, I hope never to see. Never so much as a glass o' Madeiry ashore, but salt beef an' biscuits aboard, even in the home port"

"Five pounds a month—is that all the pay you got?" asked Matthew, with the contempt he always felt for those who accepted such pittance.

"I was to have six pun' out of every hundred, an' six out of the cargo—that was sailing the *Bendemeer*: a fine, smart brig she was, straight out of the shipyard. It was her maiden voyage, and we should ha' done well—pickin' up three hundred prime niggers at Bonny——"

Matthew's interest quickened. Many a time he had wished he could raise the capital to put into one of the slaving vessels that plied between Bristol and the Guinea Coast. He knew his grandfather had had shares in them, and stories were rife of the fantastic fortunes that had been made out of the first nine years of open trade, when the merchants of Bristol and Liverpool dispatched, between them, no less than a hundred and seventy thousand negroes to English plantations

"Ay, it should ha' turned out well," Abiathar was saying mournfully, "but luck was aginst us. Three parts went sick o' the flux and couldn't pass the surgeon, an' the rest, all but a miserable score, we put overboard, for fear of infection. Slaving's a grand, well-paying trade, so long as you keep your cargo

healthy: but once start flux, or that infernal blindness that spreads like wild-fire when you get it aboard, and your profits are gone before you've started to count 'em."

"Risky business," commented Matthew. Crown pounced on the words before they were out of his mouth.

"Risky? Where's the risk, so long as you're properly fitted? The owners know it's to their interests to preserve the condition of the cargo, and, compared with common transport, it's lodging for lords! You never seen 'em throwing the corpses over off Rotterdam, have you? That's common transport, that's accounted for two thousand unlucky devils, and maybe more, in the last five years—out o' Dutch ships alone. And, mind you, Dutch transport's better than ours. Ask me if I'd sooner take a trip by transport or in a slaver and I'll answer you straight: give me a slaver, every time."

"The owners must have lost heavily, all the same, on that trip of yours."

"And who's to blame?" He brought his great blue and crimson fist down savagely on the table. "I've brought back slaves, and not a manjack among 'em changed hands for less than twenty pun' when we got to the Indies. But there was we, short of saltpetre and sarsapilly and all the stuff that's needed to keep a ship sweet an' wholesome. 'I'll not be responsible,' I told 'em—an' they laughed in my face. What's it mean to them, but a bottle less o' wine for some Liverpool gentleman, swigging in his mansion? For me it was plain starvation. 'I'm off back to Bristol,' I said, 'where they pays you a living wage—besides granting privileges that tots up nicely on the skipper's balance. No shoving your hand in your breeches,' I says, 'each time you puts into harbour——,'"

"What profit do the owners make," interrupted Matthew, "on an average healthy cargo?"

"Well, nat'rally it varies. The last trip I took here, out o' Bristol—I was mate in them days—we delivered four hundred slaves, all but a score in prime condition. The lot was sold from thirty shillings to fifteen pun' apiece—according, you see, as whether they was male or female, youngsters or full-grown. Then we'd got teeth and logwood and muscovado we brought back with us, and some of the stuff we took out for trading, that was nipped up fast when we was lying off the islands. We sailed worth something like seventeen thousand pounds, and I reckon the owners must ha' drawn a clear twenty thousand from the trip."

Matthew drew a whistling breath through his teeth.

"After paying off the charges? No wonder they say slaving pays."

"Ay, but mark you," said Abiathar Crown, "the best days are over—in Bristol, at any rate. We stole London's trade, but the Mersey rats'll beat us in the end. For all that—by Christmas, I'd sooner go lean under Bristol owners than wax fat in Liverpool service."

"Who are you sailing for now?"

"Nobody," confessed Abiathar. "I been back but three or four months, mind you—and I hit a bad time. I made sure, when leaving Liverpool, I'd ha' got a ship right away. But all this privateering has hit the owners; there's actually fewer ships afloat than there was before the wars, and them as has 'em sticks to 'em. Small blame either. I've not had the smell of a ship since I come home."

"Have you a family?"

"Now that, as you might say, 's a matter of argyment," he observed with engaging candour. "A sailor's life, as you know, 's a roving one; and there *might* be a woman, here and there, as fancies she's got claims on me. Not that it matters. An empty purse solves a deal of awk'ard situations."

Matthew threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"That's one way of looking at it! It creates 'em as well, I might remind you. I should know——" He broke off, determined not to let his tongue wag too freely until he had taken the full measure of his companion's discretion.

"Ah, you're one of the lucky ones; it needs but a look at you to see that," Abiathar was saying simply. "Well, well, to them as has, more shall be given; and if you got precious little of your own, the next best is to rejoice with your more fort'nate fellows." Again he gave his ponderous wink, in which he included not only Matthew but all of the company within earshot.

"What the devil do you mean?"

The tone brought Abiathar up short, and drew from him a clumsy movement of apology.

"You've got something in your mind. Out with it!"

"'Tis nought but hearsay," mumbled Abiathar. Glancing uneasily over his shoulder, as Shergill had done, he moved closer to mutter, "There's a Bible-ful o' yarns around the town this morning, as you can guess without me telling you: but if you've done your Uncle Jason out of some of his expectations, there's few in Bristol as won't wish you well."

"If that's the gossip," said Matthew bitterly, "you need pay no attention to it. I've known these ten years that my name doesn't figure in my grandfather's will—more's the pity; and such hopes as I had of making a little capital out of our renewed acquaintance perished last night, in circumstances that concern no one but myself——" He spoke roughly, arrogantly, for the benefit of any who might be listening. So that's what Bristol was saying, was it? Would God that it were true! The thought flashed across his mind that this rumour might account for Shergill's inexplicable generosity; but it seemed little likely that he, an intimate friend of Hercules, would lend ear to the canard. Or was it that Shergill knew something——? His heart nearly stopped at the thought. Hercules had always stoutly refused to combine business with friendship, and his relations with Clay, the family lawyer, were of the most formal. He had never employed Shergill in his professional capacity: but was it not at least possible that he might have dropped some hint about his dealings with Clay——?

A sudden burst of candour, with which excitement was mingled, made him lean across the table, to slap his companion's shoulder.

"I'm glad Bristol's so well disposed to me, 'Biathar! I may need to call on its benevolence before long!" He laughed, as he beckoned the potboy and ordered more ale. "Shall I tell you what brings me back—to a town I'd thought, and hoped, never to see again?"

II

"... You're wanted—for debt?" said Abiathar stupidly, at the end of Matthew's recital.

"My tailor, my bootmaker, my mercer, the fellow who supplies my wines and a Jew of whom, from time to time, I have purchased some trifles necessary to the equipment of a man of fashion, are but a few of the people who, in the last week or two, have served writs upon me—which I've chosen this means of evading." Matthew airily lifted his glass; he had rather enjoyed the narrative, to which he had added some touches, and omitted others, at the dictates of a not unworthy taste for drama.

"What trade do you follow?" asked Abiathar, obviously impressed by this eclectic performance.

Matthew hedged.

"I buy and I sell. I have interests in the city, and some share, no doubt, of the commercial wit of my forefathers has enabled me to support myself, up to now, without calling upon their benevolence!" Even put in these flowery terms, Matthew was aware that the description lacked grandiloquence. He frowned as he concluded: "So, you see, we are both in the same boat. In fact, I'll wager there is not a penny more in my pocket at the present moment than there is in yours."

He had forgotten the guineas he had "borrowed" from Shergill, so when Abiathar rose to the challenge, and flung a handful of small change on the table, Matthew, following suit, was a little taken aback to see gold among the coins he tossed out of his own pockets.

"'Tis a pity I didn't take your wager," said Abiathar grimly. It was evident his belief in Matthew was shaken, as he scowled across the burning forest of his beard.

"I'd dice you for the lot," said Matthew ruefully, "if I could afford to lose it. But I'm in a deuced tricky situation—and I'm not fool enough to look to my Uncle Jason to get me out of it."

"I never had use for Methodees," agreed Abiathar, as he scooped his few shillings into his pocket. "I'll never have one of 'em aboard if I know it. 'Tis Methodees and Quakers that's raising all this stink around slave-trading—taking the bread out o' mouths more honest than their own, and betraying the very town that gives 'em their victuals. Yet 'twas a Methodee as did this ornament, and a finer piece of work I never seen, betwixt here and the Carribees."

He clenched his fist and presented the back of it to Matthew, who had now the opportunity of examining at close quarters its singular ornament. The pattern, like chainmail, or the fine scales of fish, ran from half-way up the forearm to the base of the fingers; and, superimposed upon it, crimson on blue, was a nobly executed mermaid, circular breasts, snake-like curls, curving tail, mirror and all, her star-rayed eyes staring out of her plump, round face like the eyes of a puppet.

"'The Woman in the Net,' I call her," said Abiathar proudly, "and there was to have been a man-mermaid on the other hand, to keep her company; but, as luck had it, the fellow that was doing them got drunk on the money I

paid him for the female, and got himself into jail, and we sailed before they let him out. 'Twas a pity, for I never laid eyes on him since, and I never found any one that could copy it."

"It's a handsome piece of work," agreed Matthew, setting down his empty glass. He had had enough of Abiathar and enough of the port; he would go up to Brandon Hill, eat and make up for the lost sleep of the previous night, while Africa set in better order his clothes, which still showed signs of his long journey. It was mortifying not to be able to cut a finer figure at the Burmesters' table.

"Maybe to-morrow you'll take a stroll around the docks with me. There's some noble shipping in"—the wistfulness and lack of occupation of the shore-stranded sailor sounded plainly in Abiathar's tone. "Indeed," he went on, "if I had but money to venture, I could be afloat this very day. But there—I was never prudent in money fashions, and I suppose folk 'ud say I wasted my substance in riotous living!"

"Could you not borrow?"

"To borrow needs security; and the security I have to offer isn't to be wrote down on parchment and locked up in strong boxes."

"What is it?"

"Knowledge," said Abiathar simply. "What's here inside"—he pointed to his head—"is worth gold to the owners, if they but knew; but how should they? You know I'm a dunce; I can write just enough to keep the log in a style of my own; I have no fine, slippery manners to commend me to grand folk, as hasn't seen me handling my ship in a gale, or dealing with a cargo of blacks—I don't say there isn't dozens like me, and better; but I've been away so long, I've dropped from folks' minds, and, as you see, my looks aren't in my favour——"

"I shall see if anything can be done for you," said Matthew uneasily. The friendly scepticism in Abiathar's eyes stung him with the reminder that he, a Flood, could exert practically no influence in his native town. Here, in this busy centre of commercial prosperity, of solid reputations and close-woven civic interests, he was as insignificant as he had been in the London circles he had foolishly aspired to conquer.

He felt angry, defeated and helpless, like a fly in a web; his anger made his bearing more insolent, he hated the calm, settled security he noted in men of little more than his own age, their indifferent or curious stares, as he mounted towards the College Green. Their cold looks made a foreigner of him. A tearing envy of these self-satisfied provincials wrenched at his bowels: an envy which, although masquerading as contempt, poisoned him with its sourness. It had reached its apotheosis by the time he arrived at the gates, and strode up the broad and stately, although untended, drive that brought him to the front of Triton Lodge.

This was the house that Jason stood to inherit!—to which he would remove his family and his household possessions as soon as the will was read. "Unless he sells it," thought Matthew. Of the two alternatives, he felt the latter was preferable.

To keep up such a place demanded a certain quality; it was impossible to visualize. Ann Flood, with her cheeseparing economies, her starve-crow motions of hospitality, her doleful attire and her two drab, unaccomplished

daughters, in such a setting. Floods—Matthew knew at least so much of his forebears—had been famous for their generousities, for their lavish entertainings, even for a certain grandeur in a scale of living that would not have shamed their social superiors.

A passion of resentment seized and shook Matthew, as he stood upon the carriage sweep looking up at the once more shuttered windows, at the hatchment which, since his absence, had made its gloomy appearance above the porch. He could so clearly picture himself established there, with all the retinue that wealth can command, carrying on his grandfather's tradition, receiving his friends from London—how they would scandalize the Bristolians!—and meeting, on terms of contemptuous equality (the contempt, it goes without saying, was to be his, not theirs), the surrounding gentry, who came prepared to patronize the merchant's grandson.

Supposing Hercules had relented, to the extent of making some provision for his future—a possibility too faint, so far, to be seriously entertained—the most he could expect would be the crumbs from Jason's table. It was hard to know whether to be relieved or mortified by the prospect. So long as it did not come to him through Jason's grudging hands——! The importance of finding out from Shergill, at the earliest opportunity, if there was any truth in the rumour of which Abiathar had spoken came sharply to his mind. If there was hope of legacy, however small, one might at least obtain advances that would enable one to face one's creditors, upon their inevitable arrival, with a confidence at present sadly lacking.

The house, when he entered, was very silent. In one of the upper rooms, to which it had been removed from its lamentable surroundings, lay the empty shell of Hercules Flood, white-shrouded, waiting for the great coffin of oak which would arrive in the morning. Dusk had fallen: a creeping chill, itself suggestive of death, invaded the empty and silent rooms, of which all the doors stood open, as though to emphasize their emptiness. By Ann Flood's orders, no fires were lighted, and from the fireless hearths the dogs, companions of Hercules' solitude, had stolen away to warmer quarters. The scared servants, huddled beyond the swing doors that cut off the domestic regions from the rest of the house, seemed to have fallen under the prevalent hush that death had brought within the walls. Matthew shivered. He was grateful to Lydia Burmester for offering him a means of temporary escape from these melancholy and grim surroundings.

CHAPTER VI

I

"I HAVE asked young Flood to dine with us."

"It was kind of you to remember."

"I should be much obliged if you would keep your eye on Orabella. She means no harm, but there is sometimes a levity in her conversation that is liable to be misunderstood—especially by people less innocent than herself."

"Oh, Matthew is hardly likely to misunderstand. Did they not play together as children?"

"A good deal of water has flowed under the bridges since those days, my dear. To speak candidly, had it not been for your importunacy, I would rather not have introduced that young man into our household."

"But, dear heart, what harm can he do?—Poor lad, I think it is no wonder if he is somewhat wild and headstrong in his behaviour," said Lydia. "No child had ever a more unfortunate upbringing—I am sure those Flood girls are hardly human, poor things: and how much worse must such a system of rearing be for a boy?"

"If I bow to your superior knowledge in all that concerns your sex, you must leave me to be the best judge of mine. I say, it is a bad type, and I would rather see either of my children dead, than married to such a one."

"Merciful heaven, who ever thought of such a thing?—Pallas, you know, is almost indecently indifferent to men!—and Matthew is far too old for Orry, who only cares for people of her own age. As for men being the best judges of their own sex—twould be unbecoming of me to contradict you outright: yet I cannot help observing that men are often quite as unjust with one another as women. Pray, dear Ralph, put out of your head all the twaddle you have heard from Jason Flood, who may be an estimable person, but is surely the most prejudiced, unpleasant man in Bristol!"

"At the same time, it is impossible not to respect him, for a man indomitably true to his own principles. I would not, for a thousand pounds, have offered him such an affront as last night's affair, and I, for one, heartily regret my share in it."

"Twas a sad, unfortunate business, and I am sure that all must feel as you do." The slow, sedative syllables fell quietly upon his vexation, and Ralph felt, as he often did, that Lydia regarded him as much as her son as her husband. "But you were not to blame, and if the responsibility is Matthew's, I pity him."

"You would perhaps reserve your pity, if you had met him this morning swaggering in the town; a travelling showman would have made no less advertisement of his personality," said Ralph acidly.

"You know, I cannot help being interested in the boy, for I was very fond of his father." She lifted her head, to look at him with limpid candour. "You do not mind my being fond of James?—because I always think there is something poor about a woman who is not loyal to her first love."

"Knowing how well they have served me, I would not for the world disturb your loyalties." Ralph spoke tenderly, touched, as he invariably was, by her confidence in him. "Is it not time you were dressing, my love? Your invariable lateness is but another of your charms!—but I should be truly grateful if you would endeavour to be punctual on this occasion."

"I will—I will. But if it is to look after Pallas and Orry, I am sure you are a much more efficient chaperone than I. I am so apt to forget everything about the children except how beautiful they are," she confessed, turning slowly to the mirror, as though to remind herself where they inherited their beauty.

Ralph cleared his throat.

"I have a particular reason," he told her, and paused. "John Peddy spoke to me this morning——"

"Yes?" she encouraged him.

"This cannot go on for ever! She must make up her mind."

"She—you mean Pally," said Lydia calmly.

"For the last five years there seems to have been nothing but a procession of young fellows, asking my permission to pay their addresses to my eldest daughter! The thing is getting absurd." Ralph laughed uneasily. "In fact, I am determined to put a stop to it. Apart from the fact that it's hardly seemly she should play fast and loose with all her admirers . . ."

"Dear heart, how unlike Pally! You know she would not willingly hurt a fly!—and 'tis hardly her fault if the young men get emotional about her. I am sure you can't accuse her of encouraging them."

"John Peddy has four sons to carry on his business," Ralph interrupted her. "I have none. I have always intended that one of my sons-in-law should fill their place. Peddy and I have come to an agreement over Sam, who is to be taken into my business."

"As Pally's husband?" Lydia sat very still, her hands folded on her knee.

"That is included in the agreement. Sam is an excellent fellow and will make her a good husband."

"Have you told Pally?"

"I am just about to do so. I sent a message to her as I came in. I had not intended to do it so abruptly, but the current of events has forced my hand. I am not inclined," said Ralph, tightening his jaw, "to place two daughters at the disposal of an adventurer; and if Matthew Flood intends to prolong his stay in Bristol, I think you had better send Orabella to visit her cousins until he has returned to town."

"Ralph, you speak as though you knew something—bad, about Matthew."

"I know his kind. I marked his look, when I spoke of the girls. To a man of his sort every woman is fair game. I'll have him flogged out of Bristol, if he starts anything with either of my daughters!"

"And so poor Pally is to be betrothed to Sam Peddy!" She spoke whimsically; one would have said that, to her, her daughter's betrothal was a matter of indifference. Ralph, although he knew this pose of hers, could not refrain from flinging at her a glance of intense exasperation.

"She likes him enough—surely?"

"She likes him, as she likes Orabella's kitten, and my macaw, and her tapestry frame: is that enough?—Forgive me! I did not mean to tease, and

I sometimes feel I owe you an apology, for giving you so provoking a daughter. 'What's in a name?'—Perhaps I chose imprudently, being so tired of the Anns and Selinas and Henriettas that were all the rage when Pally was born. She is not cold—indeed, she is more deeply loving than Orry, whose affections swing about like the weathercock; but—I hardly know how to put it. All her profounder passions seem to be reserved for abstract subjects—for ideas that hardly seem becoming to a woman, let alone a girl just come to her twenties! She is always wanting to change the accepted order of things: she questions matters that most people take for granted . . ."

"Which all proves she will be better married. A house to look after and a pregnancy or two will soon alter her outlook."

Lydia drooped her head.

"I hope you are right. And I hope you will be successful with Pally."

"There's not, I suppose, any question of a prior attachment?" Ralph turned sharply at the door. Their eyes met, hers wide with bewilderment. "I have no wish to force her against her will; but if these refusals are merely a matter of feminine caprice, 'tis high time to put a stop to them. If they are designed to provoke some favoured swain, to whom she has given her heart in secret, the game's gone on long enough."

"Pally is no coquette; she is too kind and too sincere, and you know she is as open as the day! I am sure she has no secret lover—how should she? She meets only our own friends and their young people . . ."

"All right—all right; pray, my love, get dressed," said Ralph, with the slight inclination to testiness that was among his few signs of advancing years. "It may be that my conversation with Pallas will detain me, and I should dislike young Flood to find no one to receive him."

"I will be ready instantly," promised Lydia; it was perhaps some doubt of her ability to fulfil her promise that made her add, "Could you, perhaps—in case of accidents: for you know, dear Ralph, how bad I am, with the best intention in the world, over dressing!—could you postpone your talk with Pally? There is surely no particular haste—?"

"Allow me to be the best judge of that." Ralph's eyes had narrowed, his lower lip had the obstinate thrust against which, she knew, all pleadings were vain. "I saw John Peddy this afternoon, and gave him my word I would speak to Pallas straight away. If I put an extreme interpretation on my promise, it is—you may as well know it is—that I have here"—he tapped his heart—"a warning that previous experience has taught me better than to disregard. I do not believe that Matthew Flood's return to Bristol bodes well—for himself, or for those who have dealings with him. In my own household, at least, I can protect my interests, and the interests of those dependent on me."

"Are you trying to alarm me?" she asked calmly.

"No, for there is nothing to be alarmed about. I am offering you a warning, not to be led by your tenderer sentiments into a lesser degree of attention to your maternal duties than you would feel bound to pay if it were a stranger, instead of Matthew Flood, who was dining with us to-night. Pray, my dear wife, disabuse your mind of the picture of a loutish lad, misunderstood and misinterpreted, which seems to have survived the past ten years!" With which Parthian shot, Ralph left his wife to proceed with her dressing.

As she pulled on the bell-cord for Betty, Lydia—sagacious being!—wondered whether she had imposed too hard a test upon her husband's generosity, by recalling to his memory the origin of her goodwill towards Matthew Flood.

II

The calm, candle-lit room, with its panelling of "hedge-sparrow-egg" blue, its doubtful—but charming—Canaletto over the mantelpiece, and its suave *rose-fanée* draperies, that made of each long window a miniature proscenium, took Matthew by surprise when he was shown into it. His memories of Bristol drawing-rooms had not prepared him for such a scene; he had vague recollections of parlours filled with a jumble of objects whose owners' taste, incapable of distinguishing between good and bad, bathed in an equal glow of proud possession each varied item. A tea-service of local porcelain of a fineness connoisseurs might envy was flanked by the vulgar foreign knick-knacks that were the vogue in decoration: plaster figures, carved ivories whose value lay only in their intricate craftsmanship, atrocities in Italian mosaic and coral—brought proudly home by the merchant skippers whose wives, no less proudly, hastened to display them to their full and horrible advantage. A fireplace by Grinling Gibbons relinquished its character to the plethora of vast, painted urns, of gilded clocks and simpering Sevres figurines that loaded its mantelshef. Bristol opulence lent itself to these outrages; unlike its neighbour, Bath, it lacked the traditions of aristocracy to check its ebullience of possession—which Matthew himself had only come to recognize, and despise, since his sojourn in town.

He therefore looked with approval, and not a little envy, upon his surroundings. If Bristol trade could produce a setting like this, had he not been a fool, and worse than a fool, to reject its possibilities? This, or maybe better—Matthew was never one to under-rate his own qualities—was what he had relinquished, for the sake of a dubious life of adventure. If he had been content to follow the family calling . . . He pulled his thoughts up with a jerk. What? To have remained a Bristol bumpkin? He laughed, spreading his hands to the blaze illuminating the wide, hospitable hearth, to which a long-haired kitten, snoozing in a basket, contributed a touch of domesticity.

The rustle of a curtain, and the faint jingle of rings along a rod, brought him round quickly, to face a figure which, with the neatness and completeness of a stage performer, slipped through the opening of the curtains which masked one of the window embrasures. It was a small figure, in a spreading pink silk sacque whose ruffled bodice moulded the doll-like torso, thrusting upwards a pair of immature breasts on which Matthew's eyes rested for an appreciative second, before he transferred their gaze to the parted lips that revealed a certain degree of excitement and apprehension very gratifying to the person responsible for their expression.

"So you've come back! Just a minute—pray tell me if this is correct!" The pink sacque crackled, bent, ballooned outwards with its wearer's curtsy, that carried her down to the polished boards and shook the bright rain of curls across her knee. "Is that correct?" repeated Orabella as she rose, looking anxiously for his approval.

"'Twas a perfect performance," declared Matthew, finishing his bow—which he executed in the military style, having always disliked the drawing-room fashion of "making a leg." "And I suppose you are Miss Orabella? We should hardly have known each other, should we, without this introduction?" What a fascinating creature, he was thinking—though comical in her provincial travesty of London fashion. Nor would a London lady have delivered herself with such abandon to the curtsy—save to the prejudice of her gown. It was the hey-day of powder, and curtsys had changed, from lithe collapse into unlimited upholstery, to the poker-backed inclination enforced by the mode.

"You must pardon us that there is nobody but me to receive you," went on Orabella, "for Mama is still dressing, and Papa has had Pally in his room for more than half an hour, and must be reading her a lecture; I listened as long as I dared, but they both mumble so! 'Twas too provoking. I am the curiousest creature in the world, and can't abide secrets, can you?"

"I like to share them," smiled Matthew, amused by her frank survey of his person.

"La, how you've grown! To tell the truth, I remembered you but faintly—after all, I was but a little girl, was I not?—and you never took much notice of me."

"You must allow me to make up for such boorishness now. Though I expect you are sated with masculine attentions, Miss Orry, and a newcomer can have little chance of compelling your regard." A suspected flavour of mockery in the compliment made Orabella frown. She walked primly across the room, to seat herself in one of the chairs whose broad arms clasped her voluminous flounces. Her toes barely touching the ground, her ankles crossed, she reminded Matthew of a lovely puppet he had once seen in a fair. He had come near to falling in love with the thing, which so fascinated him that he visited the spectacle in which it appeared over and over again! The exquisite fragility, the enchanting, childlike *gaucherie* of the thin arms were also Orabella's. He reflected that a flirtation would be a very agreeable *pour passer le temps*, and help to lift the sombreness that darkened these anxious days of waiting.

"If you care for secrets," said Orabella, her ear obviously cocked towards the door, "I will present you with one. For mercy's sake, don't tell Papa you've seen me, when he arrives!"

"But if he finds us together . . .?" Matthew was tickled at this invitation to complicity.

"He won't," said Orabella promptly. "As soon as his step sounds in the hall, I shall be out through that farther door in a flash, and I shall never forgive you if you betray me!"

"God forbid I should ever betray a woman!" said Matthew, with solemnity. "But explain: what hangs on it? What do you stand to lose—your character, or something you value more highly!—if we are caught in conversation?"

"'Tis all too tedious to explain," pouted Orabella. "But 'tis a fancy of Papa's to regard me as an irresponsible infant, whereas, as you see—" She spread her hands in a gesture so naïvely coquettish that Matthew was enchanted.

"'Tis obvious," he observed gravely, "that you are a seasoned woman of

the world." He perceived from the twinkle in her eye that she had a taste for irony more uncommon in her sex in those days even than it is in ours.

"Ah, wait till you have seen my aged spinster sister Pally!" she admonished him. "Poor Pally! I often think it is a perfect tragedy that never a man will look at her, for I'm sure she's got the sweetest nature in the world."

Little minx! thought Matthew. Still, it was perhaps as well that one of the Burmester sisters should not be as seductive as this blonde witch who blinked her blue eyes at him across the room. A double-barrelled flirtation could be exciting, on occasion, but at the moment it was a little more than he could manage. The effects of his ride from London were still with him; he felt out of condition, and slack for want of sleep. He was apprehensive of the effects of heat and the wine he would undoubtedly consume in the course of the evening.

"I don't think a squint is so very revolting, do you?" Orabella was solemnly inquiring. "Indeed, it can be most attractive. There is something positively appealing, to my mind, about Pally, when her right eye looks you straight in the face, while the other is just a bit—just the least bit in life, mind you—rolled into its corner. Such eyes, too! La, I'd give the world for them—at least, for a matching pair, made to either model. Each one quite perfect in its way——"

Matthew fixed a severe glance on her, beginning to suspect that Miss Orabella was wilfully exaggerating her sister's infirmities. At all events, she was a cattish little thing—though none the less attractive for that. All women were feline, in Matthew's experience, and monstrously unfair to their own sex. But Orabella returned his gaze with limpid assurance, as she continued:

"And, of course, 'twas after you went away she had her accident. Right from top to bottom of the front stairs—la, what a scene! She doesn't use her crutches any longer, but 'twas ruin to her figure. All those broken bones, you know—a horrifying affair; 'tis a miracle she escaped as she did. And, of course, we don't notice the limp—I expect 'twill strike you shocking: but please conceal it the best you can, because poor Pally is so very sensitive about her appearance."

Cross-eyed and lame! No wonder, poor creature, beside this radiant being. Matthew felt the spasm of pity and disgust which he always experienced when faced with physical abnormalities. The prospect of having to spend the evening in the company of one who roused in him that always unwelcome sense of compassion was not lightened by the necessity of having, at least outwardly, to modify his expressions of admiration towards her sister. One could not, for humanity's sake, ogle the one and ignore the other.

"There's Papa!" gasped Orabella, sliding rapidly from her chair. She was across the room, as she had promised, "in a flash," only pausing at the door to hiss, with uplifted finger and eyes dancing with—as Matthew assumed—the excitement of conspiracy—"And remember! I rely on you to be the soul of kindness to my poor sister Pally!"

Ralph Burmester entered, excusing himself for his tardiness. His face wore a vexed, abstracted look that made Matthew wonder what accounted for the delay, as he glanced round the room for his wife. His eyebrows rode upwards. Of course. He might have known better than trust to Lydia.

"Will you drink sherry? The ladies will be with us shortly."

"One would willingly wait—if need be, for ever—in prospect of such a treat!" The meaningless compliment, echoing hollowly in its sober surroundings, was not a success. Ralph's face was immovable, as he crossed the room to pour out the wine.

"It is not our custom, in this house, to leave a guest to entertain himself," he said, as though he rejected Matthew's disclaimer. Looking across his shoulder, Matthew observed that the door through which Orabella had made her escape stood slightly ajar, and, guessing correctly that she was waiting behind it, raised his voice to reply.

"On the contrary, I have had plenty of entertainment"—he paused deliberately; did the door-handle tremble?—"in admiring your art collection, sir! Is that not a Guardi, above the cabinet? I see you are an amateur of pictures." It was characteristic of Matthew to present his superficial knowledge to the best advantage; it was by the merest chance that he had identified the Guardi—among his various ventures having been that of art dealer, in which he succeeded, as might be said of many in the present day, largely by lack of principle.

"I know nothing of art," Ralph, to Matthew's relief, returned bluntly. "I buy a picture when I like it, and whether it belongs to the Italian or the Dutch school means little to me." He paused, as though seeking a more congenial topic of conversation, and evidently did not find one, for he jerked at Matthew abruptly, "I suppose the funeral arrangements have now been made?"

"Lud, I suppose so," rejoined Matthew, with the distaste he always felt for the intrusion of dull or inæsthetic topics on a social occasion. Grimacing at provincial boorishness, he added, "As you may imagine, I am the last to be consulted! But I take it uncle Jason has the matter in hand."

"I shall ever have it on my mind," said Ralph heavily, "that I was instrumental in bringing about the death of an old friend, to whom I owe more than can readily be computed."

"You reproach yourself unduly," said Matthew, with a curious touch of Hercules' dignity, that was not lost on his companion. "If any one is to blame, it is myself, and my feelings on that score are my own affair. Egad! If you had to die, which would you choose—to flicker out mournfully, like a corpse-candle, to the tune of prayers, or to blaze to glory, as grandfather did, on some supreme moment of satisfaction?"

"There is no point in discussing it; the thing is done, and I bitterly regret my share in it."

"Be as melancholy about it as you like," Matthew's impatience got the better of his courtesy. "I too loved my grandfather and owed him—certain things. Well—I killed him, if you choose to put it that way: I am not one to shirk plain speaking. I killed him at a moment when his life was much more valuable to me than his death——"

"That I can well believe!" Ralph retorted icily.

"Go on believing it; for if, as the tale seems to go, I inherit so much as a brass farthing, there won't be lacking a fine number of charitable souls to swear that 'twas in view of that I tumbled the old fellow into eternity." He spoke brutally, recklessly, because he feared to be betrayed into emotion.

Ralph shook his head.

"If your hopes are pinned on that, you would do better to relinquish them. The last time I spoke to your grandfather, before he had his stroke, he told me all was willed to Jason."

"So much the better," retorted Matthew, though his heart sank. "For I shall at least get credit for the purity of my intentions."

"Let us change the subject—'tis but a poor prelude to a social evening. Here comes my wife—and my daughter Orabella——"

No schoolroom miss could have made a more demure entrance in her mother's shadow than Miss Orabella Burmester. Lydia, bland and mild, undisturbed by her own lateness or her husband's displeasure, greeted the guest with a warm simplicity.

"You have been too long away from home, Matthew; we are happy to welcome you. Look, here is little Orry, whom you last remember with a rattle in her hand."

"Now it is on her tongue," put in Ralph, endeavouring to recover his tenure as a host. He ruffled his daughter's curls, as Orabella, with lashes lowered, sank into her curtsy at the visitor's feet.

"Save for the absence of the rattle, I could have sworn 'twas but a minute since we met!" said Matthew as she rose. Orabella glared, and, in passing, ground down her little foot on his. As hers was heelless, and covered in satin, he was hardly aware of the pressure.

"But where is Pally?" asked Lydia, looking about for her eldest daughter. Ralph flashed her a meaning glance, which she returned. "What have you done with Pally?" hers said; and his—"Have patience; all will be well."

"You would like to look at my kitten," said Orabella from the hearth; as Matthew turned she held up towards him a purring bundle, soft with sleep and fire-warmth. Lydia had gone to Ralph and was speaking to him in a low voice. "I hope you like cats," Orabella challenged him, across the kitten's ears, which he rubbed as he bent to retort:

"I like some—the two-legged sort!"

"Hush—here she comes!" There was a rich, hesitant rustle—of all sounds the most romantic!—a tinkle, as though something had been dropped, and a pause, while it was picked up—"Your fan, Miss Pallas—oh, la, it's broken!" "Get me another." The door, which had closed behind Lydia and Orabella, was opened; Orabella hissed into his ear, "Here she is—my poor lame, squint-eyed sister!"—and Matthew found himself face to face with the glory and ruin of his life.

III

She wore a gown of striped satin, cherry red and apple green, open over a petticoat all scattered with flowers. It gave her the air of a Georgian Primavera, as she came forward, her lap all filled with blossoms, her shining hair dressed high and lightly powdered, to make a framework for her pale, quiet face. Her lips—which she had bitten almost to bleeding—were the colour of the red stripes in her gown; the drops of pearl she wore in her ears were no paler than the rest of her face. For some reason there was silence, as she came down the room, in a gown whose beauty her own made insignificant.

The proud lift of her bosom, the free thrust of her thighs against the satin that confined them, gave her an air of the goddess for whom she was named.

Ralph, who, at that moment, was none too pleased with his elder daughter, thought, "It is not to be wondered at that they lose their wits over her!" She was Lydia, with a more rich and earthly quality, "more *to her*," as North country people say. By hers, Orabella's blonde loveliness became tinselly as a puppet's. It is significant that Matthew, who was regarded, and regarded himself, as a connoisseur in female adornment, saw nothing of hers. What indeed were fashions, on that Olympian form?

He was tired of little, fragile women, of their foolish feminine maunderings, their mysterious sicknesses, their caprice in the bestowal or withholding of favours. He wanted, suddenly, a mate as strong and ruthless as himself. Perhaps, he consoled himself, this girl would not know how to be ruthless. Her lips were soft, her manner admirably disciplined; but there was no lack of strength in the small, square jaw, or of resolution in the broad, flat brow, upon whose left temple lay—oh, blest device!—a velvety mole, for the like of which a London beauty would have racked her patchbox.

At dinner he sat beside her—between her and Lydia: with, opposite, the mocking lips of Orabella (he would have liked to box her ears!), and beyond, taciturn, Ralph, whom he now knew as his enemy. It was all explained—that cold, unwilling hospitality. He was being warned off—the unwanted suitor for Pallas's hand. An unnecessary precaution! Perhaps the girl herself had been warned, for there was something remote about her: something that would have kept his advances—had he chosen to make them—at bay.

The dinner was not a success. Orabella chattered, until snubbed by her father; and Lydia, as always, was gently abstracted, the balm of her sweet, vague smiles failing to soothe the nervous irritation of her companions. For the entertainment of the ladies, Matthew turned the conversation upon London affairs, and particularly upon the new monarch, who was viewed with little favour in the circles Matthew frequented: in deference to his host's opinions, which he suspected, moderating the more salty comments of Society upon the bourgeois decorum, the insularity and narrow self-satisfaction of the third George.

"It is something, at any rate, to have a king who speaks the English language," he said, on the note of amused tolerance on which it was fashionable to speak of the sovereign. "And I dare say the coronation will be as magnificent as such ceremonies are wont to be, for all His Majesty's prejudice on the subject of frivolous expenditure!"

"It is a pity," pouted Miss Orabella, "that there is no queen to share the jubilations with him! For I'm sure a bachelor court can be nothing but dreary, with no ladies to lead the fashions and set a standard of elegance."

Matthew laughed.

"They say there is much alarm in court circles, on account of His Majesty's attachment to Lady Sarah Lennox——" he was beginning, to be interrupted by Pallas, who had caught the cold flash of her father's eye.

"It is indeed a wonderful time for a young man to come to the throne." Her voice was gentle and thoughtful. "How great an inheritance, how terrible a responsibility; and yet—what grandeur! To be king of a country like Britain, at the height of her glory, must indeed be a source of inspiration;

do you not find it so?" She appealed to Matthew, who, surprised by the soft, gleaming ardour of her glance, was for a moment at a loss for a reply. It was Ralph who said shortly:

"Let us hope he finds it so. I speak of His Majesty. Let us hope we have no cause too bitterly to lament the loss of a Sovereign who learned by forty years of hard experience the duties of acquiescence in the political conditions of a constitutional monarchy."

Orabella puffed out an impatient breath; she had so wanted to hear more of Lady Sarah Lennox, but dared not reopen the subject with her father in this mood. How tiresome was Pally, trailing the conversation away on tedious political subjects, just when it started to be interesting.

"I'd like to see the coronation," said Lydia unexpectedly.

"And I," admitted Pallas, while Orabella pressed her hands to her fast-beating heart. Surely, with her mother and Pallas united, her father could not refuse. "You will think we are very countrified," added Pallas, with a little smile half-proud, half-defiant, that made Matthew catch his breath, "but my sister and I have never been to the metropolis, and there is so much I long to see——"

It was on the tip of his tongue to offer his escort, there and then, prudence fortunately got the upper hand of impetuosity.

What was it about her that so captivated his imagination? He thought of other women with whom, from time to time, he had fancied himself in love: boldly, highly bred creatures, careless of the conventions, loud-tongued, free in their conversations as men, shameless in their desires. He had often aspired to attach such a one as these permanently to his person—a brazen tribute to his powers with women: and had always lacked means to do so. Only a gilded bait could capture such quarry, and he had to make the most of what, in moments of vagary or boredom, they chose to accord him.

She was still smiling at him, and as he returned her smile he thought with sudden and poignant regret, "What tragedy—that we should never suit each other!"

For even his overweening vanity, which fed upon the persuasion that there was no feat in the world of which he was not capable, failed to convince him that his spirit could inhabit those heights upon which hers had its dwelling.

Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor. It was the shadow upon his life that, unable to help recognizing virtue when he met it, he felt impelled to flee from it, as he would never have fled from the devil. This, he supposed, was the aftermath of a childhood in which, through coercion and exhortation, virtue had come to be so abhorrent to him that he was prepared to go to any lengths to avoid contact with it.

Yet he did not wish to avoid Pallas Burmester; or, rather, to avoid those pagan aspects of her femininity which made their usual powerful appeal to him. As the evening wore on, and unbridled imagination, stimulated by the wine he had drunk, took possession of his senses, he had an almost physical consciousness of her presence; he could picture, with unholy clearness, those long pliant limbs and his own knitted together, and from their godlike union the forthspringing of a splendid race. He felt himself tremble as he watched her at the piano, a new and fashionable instrument which had only just found its way to Bristol, performing one of those icily classical little pieces that

fashion favoured. The frail notes, falling like rain upon his quivering awareness of her body, suddenly recalled the gift he had brought, and he began to wonder how to present it.

Ralph sat by the fire with a book, and the reluctant Orry held prisoner on the arm of his chair. He had quite given up the pretence of being sociable. Lydia yawned sweetly over her patience cards, dropping now and then a vague remark into the disjointed conversation carried on between Matthew, Pallas and Orry. It was just such a domestic evening as he would have sworn gave him the horrors; yet he was caught in its spell. In his childhood he would have enjoyed evenings like these; now it was too late—sophistication had cloyed his palate for simpler pleasures. Yet he would have put up with much greater extremes of boredom, for the sake of being within sight and sound of Pallas.

"You're yawning, Orry! It's time you went to bed."

"For pity's sake, Mama!" cried Orabella, with tears of mortification springing to her bright eyes. "Onc would think I was still a baby, instead of—instead of 'a seasoned woman of the world!'" Behind the chair-back she pulled a wicked face at Matthew, who joined in the laughter her words drew forth. "Well, what does it mean, to be 'seasoned'? I have finished doing lessons, I go to the same parties as Pally, I get plenty of favours—it's not my fault if I haven't got as many—as many—admirers!" To the consternation of her audience, she burst into tears, covering her face with her hands in a childish fashion and sobbing heartrendingly. It was a trick she had had since childhood; at parties Orry would suddenly get over-tired and over-excited, and sob in that broken-hearted fashion, the more violent for the brief duration of her grief.

"Poor darling—she has done too much!" Pallas was crying tenderly, as she held her sister's hands. Ralph was muttering endearments. Only Lydia, to Matthew's amusement, sat calmly, the cards slipping through her white fingers.

"Take her to bed, Pally."

"I won't have Pally put me to bed. I'm not tired—oh, dear, the room's so hot—and so full of people!" She seemed hardly to know what she was saying. She suddenly flung her arms round her father's neck. "Papa, the moon's so bright, and I know there'll be rabbits in the field! Please, please, dear Papa, walk with me to the end of the garden. I'm dying for a little air."

They went out through the long window that, Matthew remembered, led to the terrace: Pallas calling to her sister to wait for a shawl, which she snatched from the back of a chair and ran to fling over Orry's shoulders. For a moment they stood there, the tall and the little tree, with the moonlight behind them. Then, with an enigmatical look, Orabella reached up to kiss Pallas's lips, and went quite calmly into the garden. Pallas came back, looking as though something was puzzling her.

"I thought Orry had grown out of her crying fits; it's a long time since she had one," Lydia was saying. "Pally, did I lock the stillroom door, after giving you your dose?"

"I can't remember, Mama." It was a little embarrassing to be reminded of a purge in the presence of a visitor of the opposite sex. "If you give me your keys, I will go and look."

"I will go myself," said Lydia, "for I think Orry would be the better of a draught before she goes to bed. Perhaps you, Matthew, would oblige me by collecting my cards."

... They were together, and alone. It was Pallas who, as though she feared inaction, moved to pick up the cards.

He had the gift in his hand, and he had forgotten the frivolous compliment with which he had intended to present it. As he held it out towards her his voice dried in his throat; he could remember no other occasion on which he had been embarrassed before a woman. Pallas, looking without understanding at the little round object, asked:

"What is it?"

He gave a tiny handle a twirl, that scattered a few notes like petals from the rose of time.

"Does it remind you of anything——?"

He saw the blood run up her white throat, till all of that lovely face, so nearly on a level with his own, was in a flame. Their eyes met across the little musical box, the only one he had been able to find during his morning search, and as a shaft of almost terrible meaning sped from his to hers, she drew a gasping breath.

"How strange you should remember," she stammered.

"It's been on my conscience for ten years." He had recovered his self-command seemingly with the loss of hers. He had longed throughout the evening to find some way of breaking through that distant, sweet composure which, like a sheet of dim glass, made a screen between him and her. "It's but a poor form of reparation, but I will find a better. Pray accept this, meanwhile, as earnest of my good intentions." As she was silent, he continued hurriedly, "When do we meet again?"

"Are—are you remaining in Bristol?"

"At all events until the will is read. Your father tells me there is nothing for me in it, but I prefer to make sure, rather than trust to the good faith of my uncle Jason!"

"I am so sorry—for your grandfather's death."

"We have all to die—so it behoves us to make the most of the life that is in us. When do I see you again?" he persisted.

"I—I don't know. Mama will invite you——"

"If you ask her? Tell me: you want to see me?" He cursed this crude and graceless wooing, but knew that at any moment they might be interrupted. Even as he spoke, Orabella's clear voice, obviously lifted, sounded from the terrace. Pallas gave him one more look, and rushed from the room.

IV

"You'll admit I did the very best I could for you, Pally!"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You don't suppose that ridiculous crying fit was genuine?" scornfully inquired Orabella. "I knew it was the only way of getting Papa from the room." Mischief twinkled in her eye. "I knew, of course, Mama would go while we were away."

"Orry, you didn't tell Mama!"

"I certainly did not. But I think there is nothing Mama would not do, dear Pally, to get you happily wed; and she always had a tender *penchant* for Matthew." She looked shrewdly at her sister. "I hope he made the most of his opportunity. He may be a passionate admirer, but he certainly isn't a very tactful one; he set Papa's teeth well on edge during the evening."

"Perhaps that was not his fault. . . . Papa wishes me to marry Sam Peddy."

"So *that* was it! I thought when you came in you looked as if someone had banged you on the head. Well, Sam's very nice, and I'm sure he has better prospects than Matthew, who, so Papa tells me"—she had evidently made the most of her stroll in the garden—"gets nothing at all in his grandfather's will, and has no means of support but his wits. Still, it may be very agreeable to live on your wits. I'll tell you what, Pally! Perhaps Papa will let you off if I say I'll marry Sam. I dare say I could make him quite fond of me, if you were out of the way."

"Do you suppose that would make any difference to Papa's objection to Matthew? The odd part is, I see so clearly how right he is; yet I don't—seem—to—care," said Pallas slowly.

"Of course, he is terribly struck on you!—and I wish to goodness the course of true love would run smooth, for then I should have a chance or two. It may interest you to hear I made quite an impression—which was gone, of course, the moment he set eyes on you. It's no joke to have a sister who sets every man afire that comes near her, and if I had not the sweetest nature in the world, I would by now be quite embittered about it."

Pallas managed to smile.

"It sounds as though I had better go away. For I know I shall never marry Matthew, and, for me, there is no man but him."

"Of all the poor, faint-hearted ways of looking at it! Pallas Burmester, I'm truly surprised at you! You know as well as I do that where there's a will there's a way——"

"Supposing the way were too hard?"

"I thought you were in love with him," reproached Orabella.

"I wasn't thinking of myself, but of him. You know, Orry, I am terribly stubborn, and there are things I must have . . . things I doubt whether Matthew would give me; and yet I love him—love him—love him so much," said Pallas breathlessly, "that to-night, if he had held out his hand and said 'Come!'—I believe I'd have gone with him—to the ends of the earth."

"I'm glad you didn't; I don't want to be done out of the amusement of a wedding; and it would quite blight my prospects if there was a scandal about you. You won't do anything ridiculous like running away, Pally, will you?" asked Orabella anxiously.

"No—I don't think so. No, I wouldn't. I don't believe any good comes of snatching selfishly at one's own personal happiness; and I would not for the world grieve Papa and Mama."

"Shall you pray about it?" asked Orabella, in a small voice.

"I expect so. You might do the same—if you love me, Orry."

CHAPTER VII

I

"You can't live in Bristol and not feel the pull of the sea," Abiathar was saying, and Matthew had already proved it to be true. The very presence, in the heart of the town, of the tall-masted ships, the curious network their rigging flung over the background of tumbling, rose-red roofs and little bulging façades, the fluting of a boatswain's pipe so coloured the thoughts of the people that many who had never left dry land looked upon themselves as seafarers. There were strange, silver mornings when those floating houses made their majestic departure from the harbour, in that hushed air of utter remoteness a ship assumes from the moment she weighs anchor: when the sense of detachment from all land ties, widening with the widening of the strip of water between hull and quay, communicated itself in a light cloud of melancholy to all who are left behind.

Matthew could scarcely bear to look: so blazing sweet his love for Pallas—and all mixed up with the bulging wooden sides, vast sternworks and cumbrous painted beakheads, representing, each one, a fortune to its owner. Biting his nails with envy, he cursed the folly that had made him squander means that might now have been profitably employed; he was infuriated by his own poverty. The sight of the slave captains swaggering on the Backs, with their black men in attendance, their gold-laced and gold-buttoned attire, brought poignantly home to him the rich gleanings to be had of this particular harvest, and he racked his brains to devise some means of raising the capital that might re-establish his fortune. It was unhappily too true that he had exhausted every likely source of credit; the only thing now was to try the unlikely ones—if he could discover where they lay.

"That's your grandfather's *Pride o' Bristol*—and there's the *Virgin Queen* he owned with Jack Peddy and Shergill; the old *Queen's* made a mint o' money in her time, but they say she'll not stand up to another crossing."

"What do you know of Shergill?" it struck him to ask Abiathar, in the tavern where they had been dicing—to Matthew's advantage—with a seafaring crowd.

"Lawyer Tom?" Abiathar rubbed his nose with the back of his oddly decorated hand. "Him and your grandfather was thick as thieves—only not, I fancy, over law matters. The law's not done as well for Tom as other occupations; though, mind ye, it's useful to be a lawyer, and it's pulled Tom and his friends out of some plaguy tight corners afore now?"

"Is he a person to rely on?"

Abiathar delivered his slow, blinding wink.

"Depends who ye are. I've heard tell Tom's a damned good friend and a damned bad enemy; but if there's ought to be made out of it, I reckon his friends and his enemies can depend on Tom for one thing equal—to feather his nest at their expense!" he chuckled.

"That's what I thought. Though what the devil he expects to get out of me, I'm damned if I know."

"Tom ain't a fool." Abiathar looked sidelong at his companion. "What with his bankin' and his shippin', he's done better than a lot of folks as makes more show. And I'll tell ye something: he's a fella of strong likes an' dislikes. If there's a man he hates in Bristol, it's yer uncle Jason: so if he's agreeable to you, it's as likely as not for the sake o' spiting Jason."

"Would that be a matter of taste—or something deeper?" inquired Matthew—more carelessly than he was thinking. It might be important to develop a line of antagonism between Jason and the one person who, so far, had offered him any practical assistance.

"There *may* be truth in the tale Jason once got the better of him—though it's a yarn I beg leave to discredit! For Tom's as cunning as a weasel, and has the whole book o' the law under his pousy wig!"

"I had word from him to-day—bidding me eat turtle at his house to-night."

"At his house, eh? Spreading his web to catch the fly again!" Abiathar roared with laughter. "Take my advice, cock, and confine your dealings with Tom to office hours. It 'ud go to my heart to see you coming down St. Nicholas' aisle with Totty Shergill on your arm! Though 'tis shame to make game o' the poor creature, that can't help her ill looks no more than a fella like me can help his handsomeness. It's a solemn reflection on a woman, all the same, that she can't get a husband in spite of Tom's money, that he'd part with handsome to get her off his hands."

"I wonder you don't offer yourself. A sailor's life is such that he doesn't need to make heavy weather of matrimony; and if Miss Shergill has so good a dowry——"

"I've had a go at it," confessed Abiathar shamelessly. "And though the poor girl, to do her justice, was willing enough, Tom played me false—damn him! That's the worst of having a lawyer for your father-in-law. Having got wind of another little ceremony which, by Jesus! had entirely slipped my memory, he goes pokin' around. 'Biathar, ses he, 'God knows I ain't one to make difficulties, and, but for your own plaguy indiscretions, an' leavin' your tracks right an' left, I'd have winked at it; but bigamy smells too bad, and I've got my position to think of'—which was civil enough, when you come to consider it."

"Do you know what the dowry amounts to?" said Matthew, laughing.

"'Twas five thousand in them days, but it 'ud be doubled, if Tom got what he thought a fair offer. Ten bloody thousand, and a plain woman thrown in——"

"She must be monstrous plain!"

"It's a calamity for the poor wench. Still—think of it! Ten thousand—it 'ud float the *Cassiopeia*: it 'ud make you an' me two-thirds owners——"

"You tempt me. At least"—Matthew bit his lip—"I'd have been tempted twenty-four hours ago."

Abiathar shot at him a look of profound intelligence.

"I take you, cock. There's many a Bristol bee has drunk itself silly on that honey!"

"Well, what the devil am I to do? God knows, I'm in enough of a coil, without this to tangle it: but I swear I'll have her if I burn up the harbour."

"I know of twenty others that says the same: and it's no more than fair to warn you, Sam Peddy's only one of the fellas that's after her—and the old folks favour it."

"Do you mean that gangling whippersnapper in the Punch-and-Judy outfit we saw in Cooke's?" sneered Matthew. "I could make sawdust of him with my thumb and little finger."

"He don't cut much of a figure," admitted Abiathar, "though he's a good, earnest lad, and set on going into the wool trade. Better take stock of yer competitors, cock; it's only fools goes around blindfold. Peddys and Burmesters are hand an' glove, and 'tis a useful combnation of family interests. If it wasn't for young madam, that's got a will of her own, it 'ud all be signed and sealed: so, if you've got an eye in that direction, I advise ye to move quickly. Pally Burmester's not the only one with a will, and from all you tell me, I'd not think it odd if Burmester was to force matters to a head between her and young Sam—partic'larly as he's got Sam's father to back him up."

"You seem well enough informed in local affairs!" said Matthew, on an unpleasant note. It was easy, with Abiathar's slovenly speech and appearance, to fall into the habit of regarding him as an inferior, and he had invited a snub by that glib shortening of Pallas's beautiful name.

"What's a land-bound sailor to do, but sit around and listen to what folks is saying?" asked Abiathar simply. "There's days I'd sell my soul for the crack of the crossjacks afore a nor'easter; but there's little goes on that doesn't get down to the quays, and it 'ud shock some of the Castle Green gentry if they knew all we could tell about their goings-on. What's to do?"—for Matthew had turned quickly to the wall, as two men came into the tavern.

One was considerably older than the other, and both were in travelling clothes and looked a couple of sharp cits, prepared to show the slow-witted West Countrymen how things were done in London; one ordered beer, in pronounced cockney accents, while the other peered sharply round the smoke-bedimmed taproom.

"Who are they?"

"Can't tell ye—bagmen, I should say. The old 'un I've seen around plenty times: they say he's from Gloucester and deals in grain. T'other's a stranger, but, by the cut of his jib, I'd say he's the old 'un's son.

Matthew gave a short laugh of relief and turned round again.

"That'll do for me." He beckoned the potboy and ordered brandy. "Egad, I'd almost as soon wear the handcuffs as dream 'em! What time did you say the London coach gets in?"

"It's due in the Sarazen yard between four and six; but they've had a breakdown the other side Marlborough, and it 'ud surprise me if they make it afore to-morrow."

"Confusion to all wheelwrights! That gives me at any rate a few hours' reprieve. Blast your eyes!" cried Matthew, as Abiathar, with a clumsy movement, knocked over the tankard at his elbow. The beer soaked into Matthew's smallclothes—a serious mishap, as he had no change of garments with him. "Confound you, you'll have me as ramshackle-looking as you are yourself!"

"If I chose to be unpleasant," said Abiathar, his cheeks—as much of them

as was visible above his burning beard—purpling with resentment of the insult, “I might say they ain’t partic’lar in Newgate!”

“I’ll fight you for that.”

“I wouldn’t, if I was you, cock.” He heaved his great body lazily from the settle, and stood, feet apart, facing Matthew and hitching the dingy breeches that sagged about his hips. “Tain’t a question of who beats who, for I wager we’re a match in weight, though you top me by an inch, and maybe my fists are in better fettle than yours for settlin’ argyments. Save yer guts an’ yer muscles for yer enemies—I’ve a notion ye’ll make a few! Don’t go wasting ’em on yer friends.”

“Show me my friends!” sneered Matthew, defeated by Abiathar’s good humour, yet spoiling for means of working off the bile within him.

“Here’s one, ye swab! Hark’ee: I’ve been in the same hole you’re in now—scared to turn a corner for fear of forfeiting my liberty! I’d sooner use my fists for you than against you. Stick by me, cock, and I’ll stick by you.”

“I fail to see what advantage my support can bring you,” muttered Matthew sourly.

“I’ll tell you. You’ve got the entrance where I, as a rough customer—not to speak o’ my present rig—ain’t welcome. ’Twas another tale in the old days, when me laced coat with moidores for buttons and me fine cocked hat set every lackey racin’, and I was well-nigh suffocated by women as ’ud sooner smell sea-salt than pomade on a man’s hair! Now the town’s filled up with gentlemen skippers, an’ black eye-patches are the fashion. Never mind; ’tain’t that I bear malice. It only makes one think of old times.”

“But you’re still on terms with men like Shergill and Peddy and Burmester: your conversation shows it.”

“Ay—if to be ‘on terms’ is ‘Good day, Crown’—‘How’s the weather, Cap’n’—maybe a bottle of wine if we meet in a tavern, but that don’t happen these days. I’ve no wish to embarrass them with exhibiting myself in their company—like I’ve embarrassed you.”

“Nothing of the sort!” But Matthew’s ears burned guiltily.

“Don’t trouble yourself, cock. It’s only human nater—and you’ve got less cause for shame than them. ’Tain’t my rig as shames ’em; it’s knowing I know they’ve let me down. There ain’t one of ’em couldn’t at some time or other have put in a word that ’ud just have swung the tiller for me; but maybe it’s as well. I’m beholden to nobody.”

“Well, what can I do for you, ’Biathar?”

“In places you go, there must be a deal o’ talk about shipping; and there’s one ship now in harbour that’s got such a hummin’ and buzzin’ about her, it’s sure to come up in course o’ conversation. It’s the *Cassiopeia*, that I spoke of before; she’s been for sale this last eighteen month, and now it’s been one and now another that’s for buying her, but the deal’s always fallen through. ’Tween ourselves”—Abiathar’s finger was laid to his nose—“they’re asking a bit too much for her. Hey!” he bellowed across his shoulder. “What was they asking for *Cassypeer*?”

Opinions varied, between eight and nine thousand pounds. A flashily dressed person, who seemed to fancy himself as an expert on shipping, sneered:

"Nine thousand for a frapped-up hulk that's been lying in Seamill for the last twenty months!"

"Choke yer landlubber's luff! The weather she came through her last trip was enough to twist the guts of a first-rate. an' Bill Sparke, that's been working on her, says there's not a rotten pin in her now, from stem to stern."

"Get along; she's got worm in her. When I went down to have a look at her, she'd got enough lime atween wind and water to float a battleship! If she gets across the ocean once more, it'll be to pile up on Dahomey beach"

"A lot you know about it. She's right good British oak, and I 'member seeing her dried out in the yards, six or seven years ago; I wager there ain't a spot o' mildew in her——"

"Thinking o' buying her, 'Biathar?" queried a wag, with a wink at his companions.

"Ay-ay," said Abiathar easily. "Me friend Flood an' me, we was just discussing a little pleasure cruise." There was a roar of laughter, but not a few eyes turned calculatingly on Matthew. The name of Flood still carried significance in shipping circles, but this young 'un was the fly-by-night, the ne'er-do-well. . . . Not too pleased at having attention focused on himself, Matthew leaned across to say sharply:

"Well, what more do you want to know about her?"

"Oh, bucko!" Abiathar had lowered his voice. "What a chance to be missing, for want of the miserable wherewithal! You an' me—partners—and a ship like *Cassypeer*—an' princes 'ud envy us!"

Matthew could not control the great, ticking leap of his heart at the picture Abiathar's words conjured, but he answered coolly:

"According to your flashy friend yonder, opinions seem to vary on that score."

"Hark'ee: nine thousand's a lot o' money, and maybe she ain't worth it; but I know every inch o' that brig. Her fittings is most of 'em in place, and she's in right good sea-going condition. A bit of caulking, and a coat o' paint round her bulwarks, and she's as tidy a craft as ever sailed the Atlantic."

"You should know."

"I should, and I *do*; and the tale's going round there's some owner after her, but they're that close in their dealings, you can't get to know a thing afore she's sailin' down the river, with some cunning bastard, that's a crony of the owner's, grinnin' up his sleeve. So far's my luck goes, it might just touch off the gun, if I was to get in my word before the news was all over the place. When a ship's bought and chartered, and the chatter's all over the drawing-rooms, it's too late for a fellow like me. The owner's wife or his daughter's bound to have some pretty pet of a skipper, related to the family, that's got to have the new command! Only let me get at the owners themselves, and talk man-talk, and to hell with all the cluckin' females, frying their own little fish over their parlour grates."

"I'll surely do that for you," said Matthew seriously, "and I only hope that the good disposition of grandfather's friends to his grandson will continue, and that I'll have more opportunities than I see in view at the moment. For I don't flatter myself I'm likely to be made welcome at the Burmesters' in future, and damme, an evening with Shergill and his ugly daughter's a heavy price to pay for a plate of turtle! I must see if I can get friendly with

the Peddys or the Cruikshanks: for they're more likely to produce useful information than any one in Bristol I can think of."

"Take a tip from me, cock," said Abiathar slowly. "If you hear anything about your grandfather's will, don't be too quick to contradict it—see? It never does harm to keep folks guessing, and if they choose to think you're due for your share o' the money, you'll be welcome in quarters that ain't so hospitable when a fellow's low in pocket. I got my ear to the mast, cock; it ain't that Bristol folk are any more mercenary than elsewhere, but money *talks*, and folks is apt to be hard o' hearing unless you can play the right tune."

"To hell with them." Blackness again descended on Matthew's brow. "It's bad enough to be a pauper without the additional plague of being treated as though one were heir to a fortune. Is there any living soul in Bristol who's likely to know the truth about this business?—for, damme, with one thing and another, I'll be out of my mind before Friday comes."

"There's little as lawyer Tom don't know." Abiathar wagged a knowing head.

"That had occurred to me, naturally, when he was so oncoming yesterday; it's my main reason for supping with him to-night."

"And it's he, if any one, 'ull know about the *Cassiopæia*. It 'udn't surprise me if he'd got a finger in the pie himself, for, 'sides being part-owner with your grandfather and Cruikshank in the old *Queen*, he's got a fourth or fifth share in the *Nautilus* brig, that come in last week with a prime cargo of muscovado—now unloading at Kingsmill. Tom's always ready for a flutter in shipping—so find out what ye can: it might profit us both. How'd ye like, cock, to take a trip to the Guinea Coast an' back?" He dug Matthew persuasively in the ribs.

"It depends in what capacity." Matthew smiled. "I'd surely like to have a look into the business of slaving, but I've no taste for the seaman's life, as such, and I'm not sure I might not be more profitably employed ashore."

His cool words concealed, nevertheless, an immense excitement. It was diabolical, how the whole of his present life was governed by uncertainties. A trip to the Guinea Coast might prove a complete solution of his difficulties; it would, at all events, put him out of reach of his creditors—if he managed to evade their attentions until the ship sailed. But it would mean resigning Pallas Burmester to the importunities of her many suitors, and that thought was intolerable to him. He had nothing; he wanted everything. Above all—throughout the day the certainty had been growing in him—he wanted Pallas, without whom the future was void. But was it not equally void without money?

"Is there any way," he asked suddenly, "in which one might get taken on as factor for a trip like that?" A factor would at least command some sort of salary, and he relied on his own wits to make use of any opportunities that came his way. With Abiathar's help he would soon master the intricacies of trading.

Abiathar clapped him on the back.

"We'll find better use for your abilities when the time comes! Meanwhile"—the portentous eyelid descended—"make the best use of your acquaintance with Tom, and remember: 'tis them as asks for most gets most in the end!"

The gardens were filled with the delicate melancholy of Michaelmas daisies, and blackened cadavers of giant sunflowers sagged on the walls. There were no more drifting idlers on College Green, nor swaggering redcoats to ogle the nursemaids with their hoop-rolling charges. No more chances for lovers' meetings, for the rain had turned suddenly to fog, and there was a cold snap of frost in the air.

It was Orabella's sharp eyes that spied Matthew from the window of Mrs. Hannah James's hat-parlour, where, as usual, she had decoyed Pallas, on the morning walk which Lydia insisted on for the good of the girls' health. Miss Orry was as fastidious as a little cat about getting her feet wet upon the mud-slimed cobbles, yet it was she who tore down King Street, with an indecent flapping of flounces, and, twisting her ankle in her haste, was almost flung into Matthew's arms.

"Never mind my stupid ankle—you can at least give me your arm as we go back—and I'm sure it's enough excuse for anybody," she gasped incoherently. "Come quickly—don't stand there gaping—and the rain ruining my new velvet bonnet that's only half trimmed!" Matthew almost laughed outright, to see the comical erection of pins and ribbon that represented the initial stages in decoration of Miss Orabella's head. "Was there ever so slow a fellow? Pally and I are at Mrs. James's—and there's no one else there at all for the moment. Mrs. James would never tell, because we are such good customers—and it's your only chance, you know! Papa wasn't at all pleased with you on Monday night."

"Is this your way of making amends for the trick you played on me?" asked Matthew, pinching her arm as he hurried back. She paid no attention, to pinch or question, bundling him through a door on the left of the tiny hall, into a little cupboard of a room scattered with feminine frippery, its floor strewn with pins, and alarming shapes of buckram, like capricious flowers, on every surface that offered support for Mrs. Hannah James's creations.

"And if anybody comes, I shall sneeze at the top of my voice, so make sure you're listening!" cautioned Orabella in departure.

For the first time in his life, Matthew found himself at a loss in the presence of a woman. No woman had ever called up in him the strange blend of emotions that Pallas evoked—standing there, all softly confused in her cape of rain-misted fur, her cheeks burning with a more vivid rose than they had done at their former meeting; she was younger, tenderer, more irresistible than ever in her confusion, but that which most confounded Matthew was his own unfamiliar sensation of humility and reverence—two qualities of which he would have denied the possession.

"So wild of Orry!" she was murmuring.

Had he but known it, his hesitation—which he inwardly deplored—went further towards conquering her heart than any boldness he might have shown; it was so evident that Matthew was not accustomed to hesitate in his approach to women! He took her hand, which she was holding out to him, and looked at it, as though he found it hard to credit the existence of anything so delicate and rare, before lifting it to his lips.

"I have indeed been blessed by fortune!" His voice sounded thick and unnatural; he thought, She'll think I'm the veriest clown!

"How odd a place for a meeting!" She seemed to take courage from his discomfiture. She smiled, and pointed to a chair, from which Orabella had impetuously swept the twirls and clippings of buckram to the floor. She herself sat on the corner of a rickety little couch, which became a throne merely by her action. Matthew was used to milliners' parlours as rendezvous: to the sly-eyed connivance of modistes whose palms went out for the guineas that were supposed to seal their lips. He knew the very look and smell of such places, reeking with their clandestine associations, and did not for a moment doubt that, even in the simple West Country, Mrs. James derived an agreeable addition to her income by a discreet humouring of local turpitude. But there was that in Pallas's bearing, in the serene dignity of her demeanour, that dismissed all scandalous suggestion; she might have been receiving him in her mother's drawing-room, with Lydia within call.

"I had not dared to hope——" he stammered.

"To hope—for what?"

"For the opportunity of asking your pardon."

"For what am I to pardon you?" Her lips twitched, as though she would have liked to smile, but preserved, instead, an admirable solemnity.

"For my behaviour of the other night!" he blurted out. "When all my desire was to please you, to efface, if possible, an unfortunate memory—to act like a boor! To make demands——!"

She was too sincere to pretend misunderstanding.

"Your demands, sir—I presume you mean your wish to see me again—were of a kind which most women would find flattering. I won't except myself from the general!" She laughed outright. "I'm afraid my own behaviour was sadly lacking in propriety of the kind to which you, in Society, are accustomed; but, to tell you the truth, I was put out of countenance by Orry's behaviour—as, indeed, I am at this moment. My little sister's a shocking madcap, but so good at heart that no one takes offence at it."

"I would be the last to do so, since I owe her this!" he answered.

What had come to the frivolous persiflage, the sly quips and fancies with which he was wont to enliven his conversations with women? A yokel could have been no more tongue-tied, he felt indignantly: the more so because he suspected she was laughing at him.

"Am I to have proof of your forgiveness?" he persisted. "Have I your leave to visit you again?"

It was her turn to show embarrassment. She covered it by pursing her lips and shaking her head.

"I fear you offended Papa sadly, by your irreverence about His Majesty! You know, we are stiff-necked patriots, in Bristol; we have not those opportunities, which you no doubt enjoy, of cultivating the familiarity that breeds disrespect!"

"You forget I am a Bristol man," he told her, smiling; he was a little taken aback to find himself being proud of it.

"We shall be proud if you become one," she flashed back at him; he was quick to seize his advantage.

"Would it please you if I did?"

"It would hardly become me to express my opinion," she returned, with a demureness that stung him.

Here they were, in circumstances a hundred times more propitious for love's dalliance than the surroundings of her home, and she held him at arm's length; they were far, far distanter from each other than they had been during those throbbing moments in Lydia's drawing-room. He cast about him for some means of breaking the spell.

"If you would but express an opinion, I give you word I should devote myself so to moulding my future life that it might gratify you, as its authoress!"

"Oh, sir," she gasped, "I could not be made so responsible!"

"The other day," he pointed out, "you called me Matthew."

"Did I?" Her eyelids fluttered. "It was a slip of the tongue—one falls without thinking into old habits. After all, we did play together as children!"

"Do some miles of distance, and a little space of years, make all that difference? Did you so hate me then—I would not blame you—that we cannot be playfellows now?" She must hear the ring of hypocrisy in the words: for no playfellowship could fulfil his present need.

"You know I did not hate you!" she accused him faintly.

"Then, say Matthew!"

"Matthew," she whispered.

"Pallas! Ah, that is better." He flung back his shoulders, as though consciously throwing off a weight, and laughed. So much for Ralph Burmester! How deep, he wondered, went the roots of her filial affections? "Pallas, Pallas, Pallas!"—he repeated it almost savagely. "Pallas, do you know there are a thousand questions I want to ask you?" Catching her two hands in his own, he pressed their palms together, bending his head—a very little—so that their eyes were level with each other's. "Will you play the sweet penitent, and tell me everything that has been in your life since the day I broke your musical box?" Would she, he wondered, exact an equal confession from him? A pretty situation it would be, if she did! He knew, suddenly, disconcertingly, that it would be impossible to lie to Pallas.

"It would be like reading a very dull book," she told him, with a sweet smile. "A woman's life is such a *little* one, isn't it? Especially in a town like ours, where it is not considered proper for a woman to take much interest in anything but her home! How odd that seems, when one thinks of someone like Mrs. Peddy, whose first husband was a sea captain, and she went on all his voyages with him, until the day he died. Yet, if you ask Mrs. Peddy to tell you about her adventures, she stares as if she thought you were crazy! She saw nothing adventurous about going round Cape Horn; the tossing of the ship was very annoying, because it made her drop her stitches, and Cape-town was a stupid place where she couldn't match the wool for the captain's stockings!"

They both laughed.

"But have you no love for the ordinary things that entertain women?" he pursued. "Dancing, the play, card-playing, and so forth?"

Pallas shook her head regretfully.

"I have a passion for dancing," she confessed, "but cards I abhor. I want so much more!—to travel, to see foreign countries, to learn foreign languages,

so as to talk with the people and find out what they think about their own lives—and what they think of mine! I should like to climb mountains and swim rivers——”

“Diana!” he chaffed her tenderly.

“Do you think me foolish?” she asked wistfully. “Is it always foolish to think differently from other people, and to try experiments? All the great discoveries have been made because someone was not content to follow an established rule. I am always longing to discover things, and Mama says the first word I ever spoke was ‘Why?’ I’m afraid I have said it a great many times since!”

He found himself aching to gratify all her longings, and his brow darkened so ominously that he felt her recoil.

“Why do you look like that?”

“Like what?” He spoke absently, lost in his unhappy brooding.

“As—as though somebody had blown a light out. There’s a deep line—almost a wrinkle—under each of your eyes, that I’m sure wasn’t there before. How should that be, on so young a face?”

“I will tell you. I am terribly anxious about the future.”

Her brows flickered upwards.

“How can one be anxious about the future? It is in our own hands.”

“How so?”

“It is our present actions make the future,” she told him simply. He seized her hands again and held them tightly to his breast.

“Pallas—is this part of our future?”

“It is bound to be,” she said, with so final a calmness that he gazed at her, hardly daring to accept the import of her words.

“Perhaps it is the past I fear,” he muttered, as he raised his lips from her tender, covered palms. “The past—which is always with us. What does the future mean—save the ever inaccessible?”

“It is for the future we live,” she assured him.

It was the sound of an ear-splitting and all too artificial sneeze that prevented his asking what she meant by “living for the future”; like all who live wholly on the material plane, he was always a little slow in grasping abstractions. But he left her, because to be discovered in her company might be fatal for them both, and avoided by a miracle, and the fortunate interpolation of a messenger with a tier of hat-boxes, the entrance of his aunt and cousins, on their way, no doubt, to purchase their mourning bonnets.

“La, Mr. Flood!” It was the devil’s own morning, thought Matthew, as he swung off his hat to Miss Totty Shergill, whose acquaintance he had made, in mortifying circumstances, the previous evening. “To think of meeting you here. I hope you’ve quite recovered from your sad indisposition!”

He had arrived at Shergill’s house—one of the new and roomy ones on Castle Green—to be received with the news that his host had been unexpectedly called to a dying client in Bedminster, but that, in her father’s absence, Miss Totty was fully prepared to entertain him. Remembering Abiathar’s warning, and resolved not to pass the evening *tête-à-tête* with so unlikely a charmer, Matthew produced plausibly enough his excuse: that he had called in the first place but to excuse himself, since the change of climate from London

and the inclemency of the weather had brought on a phlegm that nothing but hot punch and bed could cure.

This caused a flutter; Miss Totty instantly declared herself inventor of "an infallible cure" for the phlegm, of which Mr. Flood was implored to avail himself by staying. "You shall sit by the fire as quiet as a mouse while I put compresses on your poor aching head," she promised—an offer which was enough to make Matthew fly a mile; for, in addition to her unconscionable plainness, the poor woman had bad breath.

He did his best to avoid it, as he inquired of Miss Totty, ogling from beneath her rain-hood that, pulled over a vast bonnet, lent grotesque disproportion to her mincing figure, whether her father had yet returned.

"Not yet; I expect that stubborn old Farmer Ortright has decided not to die after all—and he never *would* make his will, unless the doctor vowed he was at the very gates of death." She tittered. "La, I'm sure wills are in the air! We think and talk of nothing else these days!"

Ignoring this not very tactful reminder, Matthew was about to pass on, when she cried out:

"But, now I think of it: Papa is bound to be back this evening, for he is to see Mr. John Peddy. I suppose it's about another ship! You'd never think a lawyer would have such a mania for ships as Papa, but I declare he thinks of little else, and I'm sure he gets more pleasure out of a gamble in shipping than out of any of his books of law!"

Cassiopeia. The beautiful, resounding name ticked in Matthew's brain—perhaps for no more reason than that he had so lately been speaking of her with Abiathar. To own such a ship—and Pallas Burmester—and the house on Brandon Hill! All of the vague envies and desires he had lately experienced in his London life crystallized abruptly in an aspiration so dazzlingly clear it almost took his breath away.

III

During those restless nights which he had passed under Hercules' roof—with the ice-cold remains of its one-time owner separated by only a foot or two of stone and panelling from the room in which Matthew lay—all of the Flood tradition of security, of stability, of honourable ownership of property and honest pride in family had taken possession of Matthew, driving out for the moment all of those shoddy sentiments of vainglory and boastfulness which, up till now, had been his only tributes to the stock to which he belonged.

There he lay, on a bed in which his mother might have lain, had they treated her better, experiencing for the first time the comforts of what should have been his birthright. When he opened his eyes in the morning, it was not upon the sordid kennel that was his London lodging—the torn draperies, the lascivious etchings, the indecencies of domestic disorder, and, ten to one, a whore at his side—but upon a room whose lofty spaces held the thoughts of his ancestors, the good, honourable citizens, the sober wives and mothers. He had always professed to despise his ancestry; in those dark night watches he began to think well of them, or, at any rate, of the things they had left behind: their splendid panelling, their cornices loaded with swags and gar-

lands, their carved fireplaces filled with Dutch tiles, their low-slung chandeliers, like inverted fountains of crystal, carrying twenty, or forty, or, in the case of the great drawing-room on the first floor, a hundred candles. He could see them in his mind, in their lappets and steinkerques of Marlborough's time, in their slashed doublets and short swinging cloaks of Elizabeth's, sweeping the stairs and wide landings with their rich brocades. None had been great, in a world-wide or even national sense, or famous, but serene in their prosperity of commerce, they had propagated from generation to generation their tradition of hospitality and generosity, and carved their names into the history of their town.

The thought of Jason, with his little, mean bourgeois ideas of living, inheriting the mansion he had begun so bitterly to covet, made him weep in the night. Let Jason have all the rest—the business, the rents, the town property and interests he, Matthew, knew nothing about; but for Christ's sake let the house go to one who knew how to live in it worthily, with regard for its dignity, and a nice perception of all that was due to so noble a possession! And with his tears went his bitter regret that he had been the first to profane it, by the shameless trick he had planned, less for his grandfather's sake than to spite his uncle—yes, even honesty came to Matthew in those nights of wakefulness, although it did not always last until morning.

It was folly, in his present uncertain position, to think of pursuing his acquaintance with Pallas Burmester. A hundred self-righteous eyes and tongues would observe and report on their meetings, if they continued to risk them; nor was she, if he read her rightly, the kind of young woman to be tempted into some clandestine affair. Pallas Burmester was accustomed to hold up her head in the light; no shady love-play would break down that palace of young virginity, that he found himself coveting the more passionately as his dread of failing to conquer it grew in his mind. It was partly the recent run of luck against him that had weakened his usual self-assurance; but he had at least the intelligence to recognize in Pallas something altogether different from his former mistresses, whose virtue, in most cases, was as frail as their complexions. He was in love—he had bitterly to admit it—with a young woman who commanded his respect, as well as his passion: and a genuine respect, not the gimcrack affair of bowing and scraping, compliments and *billets-doux* that passes for such in his London circle.

But—her eyes, her lips, her hair, the soft peaks of her breasts under her satin gown! Oh, most delectable of mountains, to be scaled by love alone! And the supple length of her limbs that dwelt ever in his imagination, stretched along his own, to proclaim in every quivering muscle their predestined affinity! She should be his, if mortal will could make her so; and all the forces of malice in the meantime should not prevent him from wringing from her some admission that her passion matched his own.

With that gauge of love once in his possession, no foolish consciousness of present disadvantage should prevent his approaching her father, to demand an understanding.

"I've been in worse corners before," he told himself, "and have always got myself out of them; why should it not be so again?" Yet his heart misgave him, when he remembered by what means such liberations had been secured. A painful and puzzled longing to live, henceforward, according to

his lady's standards teased him; through Pallas he had glimpsed, perhaps for the first time, the happiness and freedom of living an honourable life, and he racked his brains to discover how this could be devised.

IV

"Twelve coaches—with six horses each—and the bell to toll for sixteen hours!" Jason was moaning. "'Tis an abomination of squandering, and will be a sore affront to the brethren."

"Your late father did not belong to your sect, Mr. Flood—and the town will expect it. There is provision of five hundred pounds, made expressly for this purpose."

"And the gloves—and the suits of mourning for the old people—and the wine! The wine—an outrage on all our principles! Is there no way in which the dead may be shown respect, without doing violence to the living?" muttered Jason—when Matthew's name was announced. He flushed with annoyance and astonishment.

"What's the fellow doing here? Decency at least might have kept him at a distance. There's no reason for his hanging about, I take it?"

"None whatever," said the lawyer precisely.

"If he comes cadging for money, you will inform him that the family acknowledges no claim on his behalf. My father was too good to him—a dissolute adventurer!" said Jason viciously. "If it weren't that I wish to draw no more attention to his existence than need be, I'd turn him out."

"There'll be time enough for that, after the funeral. And I think he will save you the trouble—after hearing the will."

"That surely is a private matter, concerning only myself and my dependants! There is no need to make a public occasion of it."

"There are certain legacies—and I have received notification on behalf of your brother Jonathan, that the legal firm which looks after his English interests are sending a representative to the funeral. This person, at least, will expect to be present, and it will be difficult to ignore your nephew's claim, as a member of the family. It is a form of gratification which, if I may say so, you need not, in the circumstances, grudge," said Clay dryly.

"The sooner the whole business is over, the better I shall be pleased," muttered Jason.

His irritation was not soothed by coming face to face with Matthew, who, tired of the box-like apartment in which he had been penned to await his interview, had lounged out into the office and, to the horror of the elder clerks and the immense entertainment of the younger ones, was tossing dice upon the counter. "Three aces, boys, and it's drinks all round," he had just informed the sniggering company, when he found Jason at his elbow.

"Well, well! Making sure of your property, uncle?" he observed, cocking an eyebrow. Jason advanced a pace, glaring up at his enormous nephew. The contrast between the two was so absurd that one clerk, seized with a fit of tittering, exploded into a hiccup, and was clouted out by his superior.

"I shall be glad to know when you propose to leave Bristol? It may not

have occurred to you that you are at present my guest; I am not disposed to extend the hospitality indefinitely."

"Nor I to claim it," retorted Matthew. "I've not got much to thank you for, uncle Jason, and I have the less shame now, when it suits my present convenience to be in your debt. But I fancy public opinion would condemn you if you were to turn me out before paying my last respects to grandfather."

He swung on his heel, and, without pausing to be announced, thrust open the door through which Jason had just appeared from the partners' sanctum.

The little dry, bewigged figure of Mr. Cornelius Clay—senior partner of the firm Clay, Hornbrook and Clay, which had handled the Flood affairs for the better part of a century—turned in its chair, expressing with raised eyebrows and pursed lips its disapproval of this unbecoming entrance. Matthew was instantly aware that he had committed a solecism and proceeded to make up for it with an elaborate bow.

"You must pardon my haste, sir! But I am in Bristol only for a few days, and many affairs call for my attention," he said boldly. Hercules Flood, he knew, was never one to waste time in kow-towing to an attorney. But the frigid bow he received in return reminded him, as it was intended to do, of the gulf that separated his position from that of his grandfather.

"I was not informed you had affairs in this city, sir."

Matthew glared. So the old snake knew all about him? Jason's version—or, perhaps, even more unfortunately, direct reports from town. Well, he had begun badly, so now let matters take their own course.

"And if I had not—would that absolve you of courtesy?" he retorted hotly. "I am no more accustomed than my grandfather, sir, to be kept waiting in your kennel, until it is your pleasure to receive me."

"You are misinformed, Mr. Flood," said the other coolly. "When your name was announced, I had a client with me."

"That might have been explained."

"It is explained now. You have business with me?"

"Yes." Matthew's resentment of the supercilious manner of the speaker scattered discretion to the winds. "I wish to know whether my name appears in my grandfather's will."

"You are proposing, I take it, to attend the funeral?"

"I certainly am."

"Then you will no doubt be present at the reading of the will, which will take place, as usual, at the conclusion of the obsequies. Good-day, Mr. Flood."

"God damme, sir!" Matthew exploded. "What right have you to treat me in this fashion? I know, of course, that my relations have agreed to treat me as an outcast, and would like to deny my right to share in any occasion that concerns the family. But that's no damned business of yours! I have a right to be as well informed as any upon a matter which may affect my future. I shall be much obliged if you will inform me whether I may base any plans I may now have in mind upon my expectations from my grandfather's will."

"In my opinion, such a course would be rash in the extreme."

"You mean, it would be totally unfounded?"

"Totally, Mr. Flood."

CHAPTER VIII

I

Fortune favoured the lovers once more, during that week of apprehension, when, for Matthew, every lurking shadow harboured an enemy, and he went in hourly expectation of the arrival of his creditors—or of their representatives—and wondered what means to employ to persuade them to give him license, at least until after the funeral. There could, he knew, be no more definite death-blow to his hopes in regard to Pallas than his arrest for debt, here in a town that nourished its scandals and kept them alive from year to year.

It was a foggy November afternoon, and Pallas, with the maid Betty in attendance, mounted Brandon Hill on an errand of charity. It was the girls' old nurse who lived in a hut on the edge of the common, and throughout the winters it was the custom of one or another of them to pay a fortnightly visit with nourishment and odds and ends of warm clothing for old Mary, who stoutly refused to go into the almshouse.

If Pallas's heart beat faster as they approached the Flood boundaries, she gave no sign. There was a skimming of frost on the cobbles, and she and Betty clung together for mutual support; mist hung the tree branches with globules of moisture, which congealed almost as soon as it formed, melted, dripped off and formed again. "Let's breathe for a moment!" gasped Pallas—and if the place she had chosen for her rest happened to be the gates of Triton Lodge, it was no matter for comment, since it was just there that the ground started to mount sharply towards the crest of the hill, and both were out of breath from their long walk. Between the great posts, each crowned with its fabulous stone monster, from which the house took its name, the broad drive wound up to the façade whose upper storeys were just visible from where they stood; no more than a shadow through the drifting mist, it seemed to Pallas, shivering, more like a tomb than the home of living habitants. Under its balustraded roof a Pharaoh, amidst his splendours, lay waiting interment. The iron gates stood open, the drive was derelict with ice-skimmed mud and the black tangle of laurels, that had crawled across the carriage-way since there was no one to care for them.

"La, what a nasty, black, fearsome hole!" Betty was sniffing, with red-nosed resentment of the uncomfortable outing. "The lodge empty as well and half the windows broke! I can't think how Mr. Matthew brings himself to sleep in such a bogey ridden place."

"Don't spy, Betty," said Pallas sharply, "and come along! I doubt we'll get to old Mary's at all, unless you stir yourself."

"I'm sure if the mistress had known what it was like, she'd have sent the coach," Betty was complaining, and Pallas was just about to retort that exercise was exactly what she needed—being far too fat and broad in the beam for a young woman of twenty-four—when, with a squeal and a flounder, Betty's feet shot from under her, and she was only prevented from rolling in

the gutter by an arm which came out of the fog, to drag her to a masculine bosom, while a voice which Pallas recognized, alas, too well, exclaimed, "Egad, it's a bad fog that brings no one any good!" and the sound of a smacking kiss betrayed the giver's propensities, where the female sex was concerned.

"Oh, goodness mercy!" gasped Betty, tearing herself away; and at the same moment Matthew became aware of Pallas, leaning against the gate post, her hands in her muff, her eyes dancing at this revelation of her lover's character.

"Pallas—Miss Burmester!"—For once his self-assurance failed him. He made a movement towards her, from which she modestly withdrew, her eyes on her perturbed handmaid.

"My maid is hardly used to such treatment, sir, on the part of my friends"—but her voice trembled with laughter. "Perhaps you will kindly assist her in collecting the contents of our basket, which your attack seems to have scattered all over the road."

"Damn the basket. What are you doing with baskets, on a day like this?"

"Charity, sir, doesn't wait upon the weather," she mocked him. "All the same, I fear charity will have to wait for another day." Her hands were locked tightly inside the concealing muff; inwardly she was trembling. "We're going home as fast as we can—make haste, Betty: the fog's getting thicker every minute, and I'm afraid poor Mary must go without her soup, unless Mama sends one of the men with it to-night."

The fog, indeed, was pouring in clouds across the shoulder of Brandon Hill—partly sea-mist, partly the dank, November brume that, in a few more minutes, would fill the valley and the town with its coiling and sinister presence. They could see it bearing down upon them like a great, silvery sponge, floating in the humidity of the upper air, and even Pallas, who feared nothing in nature, was a little dismayed: for, to regain St. Michael's Hill, they had either to cross Bullocks Park and the open fields, or to take the longer but probably wiser course of running down to College Green, then up again to St. Michael's. It was not often they got such fogs in Bristol, and she knew enough to recognize the unwisdom of continuing on her way.

"You must take shelter in the house until it is over!"

"You *know* I cannot!" What Bristol fog could excuse such a departure from the conventions? The most unblemished reputation could hardly be expected to survive! She pressed the fur collar of her pelisse closer against her lips, the fog stung tears to her eyes.

"I must speak to you, if only for a moment." He was bruising her arm with his grip. "Come—at least within the gate."

"Betty!" she gasped.

"Betty can wait in the lodge: it is empty, but the door is not locked."

"But we—where shall we go?"

"Come, and I will show you."

He pulled her off the drive, into the shrubbery, which yet held off the encroaching wreaths of mist; there was a narrow path between the sodden evergreens, where the fallen leaves made papier maché under their feet; it was nearly dark, and desperately cold, but both were burning. He brought her to a tiny pavilion, built after the Palladian style that was favoured by Georgian

architects: a little domed temple, with gazebo windows in its circular walls. It was dank with cold, and smelt of dead leaves.

"Are you afraid of bats? There may be a bat or two."

"Not with my hood on," she told him.

There was a lantern, with a candle-end in it; Matthew produced his tinder-box and kindled the flame; their tiny cage revealed itself in dim, orange light, the walls partly covered with a leprous damp, partly decorated with harps and flutes, with little garlands and loops of riband, a wistful feminine gaiety on which Pallas, to spare her blushes, made comment.

"What a pity that the damp has ruined the rest of the painting!" Matthew told her. "It was an Italian painter, who, most indiscreetly, fell in love with my grandmother before his work was completed! Grandfather chased him out of town—no scandals, for the Flood women!"

"Somebody has made a fire," she commended, looking at the ash on the miniature hearth.

"It was I; the house is enough to drive one into melancholia, and I had some papers to read, which I brought out here. There is still a handful of sticks—let us make ourselves comfortable." He bent, his shadow bending with him, to rake together the remnants of the former fire, and she helped him, so that, suddenly, a little warmth broke from the embers. He turned and took her hands.

"This is what I have dreamed of, Pallas—there is not time—there will never be time—to woo you as I desire. I love you. Do you love me?"

"Yes," she answered, with a sobriety that made every pulse start in his body.

"Will you be my wife?"

"Yes," she replied, on the same calm note. They had no time to remark on the miracle of it, or to indulge in those sweet, long-drawn-out ecstasies of happier lovers.

"I have nothing to give you. What about that? I can make you no home at present."

"I will wait," she comforted him.

"God knows what the future holds."

"If it holds you, it is enough."

"My glorious Pally! I am so hungry for you, I am almost mad: give me your lips."

As their mouths met, he felt her innocent craving towards him, and was sorely tempted to take some base advantage of her innocence, but as, in her presence, he felt always constrained to be something better than himself, he held back ignoble desire, and, after that one deep, ineffable embrace, pressed her soft palms against his burning face.

"I shall never love another woman, if I live to be a hundred; what can I do, to make your father believe it?"

"You are going to tell him?" He felt her start.

"What else can I do, dear love? I must see him to-night—or to-morrow, if that will not do. Pally, Pally! I never thought I had it in me to regret the past, but, by God, if by any sacrifice I could wipe out that record that stands against me, I'd undertake it—if it meant the risk of my life."

"What good would that be to us, my love? I want you living!" The quivering ardour of her voice left no doubts of her sincerity.

"Is there any doubt we were made for each other? Pallas, is it true you love a rogue?"

"If I was made for a rogue, I needs must love him!" she retorted.

"You'll hear some ugly things of me, Pallas; what of those?"

He felt her head come up in a movement of pride.

"At least I am free to believe as much, or as little, as I choose."

"My dear sweetheart! I'd sell my soul, not to wound you."

"God will help me to bear it," she answered him, simply.

"Am I to have a religious wife?" he teased her.

"Should you mind—very much?"

"It is something so foreign to all my conceptions that I can hardly say!" But the tightening of his arms took the sting out of the doubt. "You are no fool, Pally; if you believe in a beneficent God, I'm willing to admit there may be something in the idea, which, on the evidence of my senses and personal experience, I am bound to question. Where do you find your God, sweetheart? And how does it happen He does not warn you against a fellow like me?" Yet in his tones rang the confidence of his power over her, against a thousand gods.

"I am so indifferent a Christian," she admitted, "that I am hardly able to say where I find my conviction of God's existence, which, nevertheless, I believe in as I believe in my own. There's certainly something in the world that works for our happiness—or you and I would not be together now: some power that is responsible for bringing people who love each other together."

"Even in such circumstances as these! You are sure you do not suffer, my love, from this vile darkness and cold?"—the little fire of twigs had blackened on the hearth.

"Not nearly so much as poor, miserable Betty, who must be sneezing her heart out—if she hasn't perished with fright, in that cold, dark lodge! Matthew, dear Matthew, I must go; I think we are both a little mad. At least no lovers ever plighted their troth in such inauspicious circumstances."

"I cannot leave you two to find your way back alone. Damn Betty! I suppose I shall have to take her on one arm and you on the other."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when each heard a footfall, a rustling in the bushes that surrounded the little pavilion. Matthew had barely time to blow out the candle, and, thrusting Pallas behind him, to leap to the door, when the panting figure of Africa disengaged itself from the fog and the laurels.

"What the devil do you here? Who set you to spy on me, you black rascal?"

"I ain' no spy, mars' Matthew! Done fin' yo' footprints in de mud—folla you heah," panted Africa, little but his teeth and the lustre of his rolling eyeballs apparent in the gloom. Matthew, swearing inwardly, wondered how on earth he was to get the women away. Leaving the door open, he gripped Africa's shoulder, and pushed him farther down the narrow path. She should at least have room to bolt, if she had the wit.

"What for?"

"Two gemmun come to de house—arsk for Mars' Matthew. T'ink dey come on bad business—say Mars' Jason send-um up de hill."

Trapped—at last. For the last forty-eight hours he had been on tenterhooks,

timing the arrival of the London coaches, trying to guess how long it would take his enemies to hunt him down. Yes—Jason would be the one to betray him. With what satisfaction he would give the view halloo to the hounds—not caring that the fox happened to be his own kith and kin!

Jail—disgrace—loss of Pallas. All the hideous future shot through his mind—the future they were to have shared. Was it likely she would share hers with a jailbird? Whatever might be her own loyalty, he had seen enough of her family to know they would prevent it, if it meant putting her under lock and key.

There was possibility of escape in the fog—but whither?—and for how long? He was again nearly penniless; his horse was still lame, and Hercules' animals, fat carriage beasts, were used only to dragging the heavy coach up and down the Gloucestershire hills. There was not a friend in the world to whom he could turn—unless it were to Abiathar, who would probably give him shelter and hide him for a day or two. But the hue and cry would be raised—unless he could find some means of placating these unwelcome visitors—and his reputation, such as it was, destroyed no less effectively than if he surrendered to justice.

He turned roughly on Africa.

"Why did you let them in?"

"Couldn't do no'ting else, Mars' Matthew. Dere's a big fella an' a little one. Big fella throw little one into de hall as soon as I open de do', and folla pronto—'fore Africa know what it was all about."

As Matthew strode into the hall, two bundled figures hoisted themselves from the settle on which they were sprawling. The hall was as cold as an ice-house, and they were muffled to the chin in shawls that, tucked partly into their greatcoats, gave a humped and sinister outline to their shoulders. The larger of the two advanced on Matthew, while the smaller, with a movement of practised agility, slid between him and the door.

"Well, mister! You needn't have given us all this trouble."

"Nor you me," said Matthew, coolly. "You have bad weather for your visit, gentlemen; I don't doubt the reason of it was urgent, for surely a dog would not choose to be abroad on such a day? As this is a somewhat public place, for the discussion of matters of business, perhaps you will accompany me to more comfortable surroundings"; he spoke with the easy geniality which experience had taught him paid best, with birds of this feather.

"We ain't here for discussions," grunted the big fellow, whose height, as Matthews observed, was but an inch or so below his own; he was as broad as a barn door, and bore the empurpled and bellicose aspect of one accustomed to enforce persuasion by physical power. "You know what we come for, Mister, and the less fuss made, the more agreeable for all parties."

"I take it," said Matthew, "you are representing my friends in town, whose friendship seems less powerful than their anxiety about their money!"

"You guessed it; and we got the warrant for your 'rest; so you'd better come along quiet, if you don't want no bother, Mr. Flood." The movement he made towards Matthew was, however, checked by the latter's expression, which, although smiling, was not such as to invite rash action on the part of his *vis-à-vis*.

"Not quite so fast," said Matthew quietly; "and, by the way, do me the
S.M.U.

favour to remove your hats. I'm not given to formalities, but my grandfather lies dead in this house, and, till his body is removed, I exact the respect due to his remains."

They looked at each other uneasily, as though suspecting a trick; the smaller sullenly dragged off his hat.

"Your hat?" smiled Matthew at the taller fellow, and swaggered towards the door of the dining-room.

"Here, where are you off to?" growled the latter, dogging him, but with his hat in his hand.

"I have a taste for privacy, in matters of this kind," said Matthew carelessly. "And a good oak door is the best security I know against the betrayal of secrets." The candles were lighted, and he did not fail to remark the effect which his surroundings made upon his companions. "Now, gentlemen!" It might have been Hercules who stood at the sideboard, with a decanter in either hand: save that Hercules, his grandson was persuaded, had never found himself in any such uncomfortable situation as the present. "Here, as you may perceive, is the best Jamaica rum, and here a cognac of excellent quality, either of which is grateful upon a winter's day. Permit me to offer you some solace for the untimely mission upon which you are come!"

"Tain't no use," mumbled the little man, who had been quick to follow his companion's head, and Matthew, into the room. "The sooner the job's done the better."

"Hold yer gob!" the other prompted him, and jerked his head towards the decanter of rum. "Now then, Mister, what's your game? You know there ain't no bribing of his Majesty's officers." He tossed back two-thirds of the tumbler Matthew passed him, and stood, legs apart, sucking his lips, while his little eyes, sunk under their sprouting brows, followed each of Matthew's movements.

Matthew threw a glance at the Sèvres clock on the mantelpiece: he only sought to make sure that Pallas and Betty, in Africa's charge, were far enough down the hill to be beyond danger of overtaking.

"Bribery is hardly a word to be spoken in polite society," he said lightly; he passed the bright bubble of glass containing the cognac reflectively beneath his nose, before tasting its contents. "But friendly arrangements come into another category! You have come a long way, on a disagreeable errand, to a town which, I fear, is little likely to afford you entertainment. Bristol, gentlemen, is a seaport—a fact which can hardly have escaped your attention; and the amusements it offers are little to the taste of Londoners. In fact, the sole virtue of the place is that it represents the gateway to—the unknown! How many of our ships bear their freight of merchandise and living souls beyond the boundaries of your and my imagination! How many who have watched their departure have felt the thrill of envy for those, more fortunate, who exchange the troubles and responsibilities of a life ashore for the careless tranquillity of an ocean voyage!"

"Eh?" said the little man stupidly; the other drank deep from the tumbler he did not seem inclined to let out of his hand.

"Supposing you'd got here too late? Supposing I'd bolted—was on the high seas? That precious document of arrest wouldn't have been much use to you or to your employers!" said Matthew persuasively. 'Tis a contingency

that might well have arisen, and for which you could not have been held to blame."

There was a pregnant silence; he had no hope that the argument would succeed; even supposing the fellows were open to bribery, what had he to offer them? There was only his last hope—Shergill, whose somewhat fulsome promises might, or might not, hold good. As a lawyer, however, he might find some temporary way out of this impasse.

"You ain't on the high seas," growled the big fellow, setting down his emptied glass, "so take advice as is well-meant, mister, and surrender yourself without further ado. We got our instructions to take you in custody for debt."

"Keep off, if you please," said Matthew, with dangerous quietness. "This comedy has gone on long enough, for my liking! There is a mistake, gentlemen, of which I'll leave my lawyer to persuade you. Inhospitable as it may seem to turn you out of doors on such a night, I'm afraid there is nothing for it but for you to pay a visit to Mr. Thomas Shergill, in King Street, who will give you all the satisfaction you desire. As you are strangers here, it will give me pleasure to offer you conduct down to the town."

"Come on, Spears," said the big man suddenly. "You got the handcuffs, ain't you?"

"If you have," said Matthew, detaching his shoulders from the mantelpiece, against which they had been indolently posed, "I strongly advise you to keep them in your pockets." The mask of geniality dropped, he faced them, and it was plain that he was prepared to resist any attempt to curtail his liberty. "It hasn't escaped your notice, I imagine, that I could crack your heads together about as easily as I could crack a walnut?"

"Well then, you'd swing," said the little man cheerfully; he seemed the bolder of the two. "Now, don't be unreasonable, mister, we're only doing our dooty."

"I'm not unreasonable in insisting that you should make sure of your grounds before putting your order into execution. I will accompany you, if you choose," said Matthew, seeing from the clock that Pallas and her companions must be well away by now. He bawled for a servant to fetch him his travelling cloak. "And plague on you!" he muttered, "for offering this inconvenience to a gentleman!" As the little man moved up nearer—"Hands off!" he added; "or, by God, I'll let daylight into both of you."

"Hands off, while you dodge away in the dark, is that it?" snarled the other, taking an evidently hesitant step towards Matthew.

"You fool!" said Matthew. "If I'd anywhere to dodge to, do you suppose I'd not have gone before now?"

II

Lawyer Shergill's office—it surprised his new clients to find—was furnished more like a shipping than a legal office, the panelling was hung with prints and a few crude paintings of every kind of ship, from the China clipper to the brigantine, while a collection of rough drawings, obviously by an amateur hand, recorded a variety of native and obsolete craft—polacre, lorch, bucentaur, coracle, galliass, xebec and piroque—each of which was identified by a

neat label at the foot of the sheet. On a table stood a fine-scale model of a Spanish first-rate, and on Shergill's desk, among the confusion of his papers, a smaller, three-masted model under process of reparation. There was enough sea-tackle about the place to furnish a cutter; it covered deed boxes and bundles of documents loaded with dusty seals, giving eloquent proof of the real trend of its owner's interests.

Since three of the afternoon the candles had been lighted, and shed their wavering light upon the immense, crouching figure that bent over the little three-master, manipulating, with fingers as delicate as pliers, blocks hardly bigger than grains of mustard seed, and filaments of cotton that made spiders'-web among the spars. It was the passion of Shergill's life, this collection and reparation of ship models, and the inclemency of the weather, which kept away clients, was welcomed by him as an opportunity of devoting more time than usual to his favourite occupation. It was a task which demanded sobriety, and to which was subdued his second passion—the port bottle which stood, its neck encrusted with dirt and glue, at his elbow. Until he had finished, he would not risk a blunder that might ruin his precious handiwork, from which he extracted the pleasure a woman gets from her needle.

In the outer office, the older clerks slept and the apprentices played dice for halfpence. There was never much to occupy them in Shergill's office, which he had inherited from an obstinate old father who lived to be a hundred, and would never listen to his son's frequently expressed longing to be allowed to go to sea. He had fortunately left a sufficient fortune to enable "young Tom," as he insisted on calling him, when his son was well over sixty, to be independent of a business for which he had so little taste, though not a little ability; and it was partly indolence and partly indifference which had prevented Shergill from selling it when it came into his own hands. That, and the ship-owners' business he handled; it was useful to be in a position to manipulate the law in one's own favour, and Hercules Flood was not the only person who had found it convenient to have a lawyer on his board of owners. A member, like Hercules, of the Merchant Adventurers' Company, and almost as deeply involved as he in shipping ventures, Shergill was wont to declare that the sea had served him better than a lifetime of law—quoting his bankers in support of the statement. He was regarded as one of the soundest men in Bristol, from a financial point of view, and if there were a few who took exception to Tom's methods of doing business, there were more who were satisfied to shut one eye, in anticipation of the advantages to themselves to be gained by a convenient blindness.

He was disgruntled when the jangle of the outer office bell announced the arrival of a visitor. Peering through his window, which overlooked the street, darkness and fog alike prevented him from seeing who was likely to disturb his occupation. Devil take 'em! They had no business to come plaguing him on an afternoon when every civilized human being was huddled over his hearth.

"Who?" he snapped at the clerk who opened the door.

"Mr. Matthew Flood, sir, and two other gentlemen——"

"Come you in, my boy!" he roared, thrusting his spectacles up on his brow, and wiping his hands down the sides of his breeches, which already were deplorable with the grime accumulated in his present occupation. Young

Flood—it had been in his mind to send for him this night, but that mizzen stay-sail had sent it right out of his mind! Still, providence looked after one's business, if one had not time to do it for oneself. He creased his ponderous belly in a bow, as Matthew, immense in his fog-misted cloak, strode into the room, followed by two persons whose profession the astute lawyer spotted at a glance. "No need to apologize to friends for my unprofessional occupation! How are ye, my dear sir?—and who are your friends?"

"No friends of mine," said Matthew, with a glance at the closed door. "To put it bluntly, these fellows have come to arrest me for debt, and, bearing in mind your friendly offer of a day or two ago, I thought it possible you'd help me to meet the situation."

III

"My dear boy, all I ask is you should regard me *in loco parentis*!" Shergill was saying an hour later.

"As I barely remember my parents, sir, I'm not sure of the correct procedure!" Matthew's lips curved into a thin smile. "But, to judge of my acquaintances, who are not similarly bereaved, the usual approach seems to be a request for money!"

Cradling his belly on his clasped hands, and closing his eyes, Shergill nodded like a bonze, but his lips tightened. He had already taken a risk—an enormous risk.

"Proceed—proceed."

"You made me yesterday," blurted Matthew, "a generous offer. Generous, I mean, considering the fact that, however paternal your sentiments may be, sir, you are not my father, and have no reason to be so accommodating! Perhaps my reception of your offers was a little brusque; if so, I apologize. My experience of life has been—a hard one, and, to speak frankly, I'm not used to receiving such offers from strangers. As a man of the world, you'll appreciate the doubts that were in my mind: 'doubts, I may say, that your assistance this evening has gone a long way to dispel.'"

"Tt-tt. Your grandfather and I were best friends from the day we was breeched."

"Mr. Shergill," said Matthew, "I'm no fool, and my knowledge of mankind doesn't increase my belief in philanthropy—more especially, if you'll excuse my saying so, from members of your profession. Why are you interesting yourself in my affairs? You're not, I take it, a man of excessive fortune—"

"Money's fortune, according to how you handle it. I ain't one, sir, to hoard my means, or to sink 'em in securities to benefit my descendants. Why should I, seeing I've no descendants but a poor gal that, so far as I can see, ain't likely to make a grandfather of me? Circulate your money—circulate it! I learned that from your grandfather. 'Tom,' he says to me, 'the law won't keep you in 'bacca.' 'Twas he put me in the way of better business, and if I see fit to pay my debts through one of his blood——"

Matthew's gesture waved this fantasy aside.

"You put me out of the way while you were dealing with those two rascals," he said—he had been invited by Shergill to step into the adjoining room, when the position had been explained, and although the connecting door was left ajar—presumably on the demand of his would-be jailers, the mumble of voices within was too low for his ears to catch. He had not failed, however, to observe the deference with which the two saluted him, when Shergill ushered them past him, into the street. "So I have no means of knowing what passed between you; but I have sufficient experience of these unpleasant gentry to know that the settlement of my affairs must to some extent have involved your personal credit. Isn't it time we had an understanding? I naturally want to know the extent of my commitments—of my debts—to you; though it's only fair to add that my present prospects of discharging them are so slight as hardly to be worth discussion!"

"Damme, sir, you're Hercules' grandson. Ain't that enough for you?"

"Yes, yes. Don't forget I come of commercial stock! What do you think you're going to get out of it?"

Shergill's eyes vanished in the wrinkles of his silent laughter.

"No use urging the claims of sentiment on you, eh? They say Floods are tough; damme if you ain't the toughest of the lot. 'Tis a serviceable quality: but it needs supplementing. A streak o' romance, my boy, a streak o' romance. 'Twas strong in your grandfather, don't tell me it's been left out of your system."

"As a practical man," muttered Matthew, sullen as a hunting dog at being diverted from his object, "I've little use for the romantic—which is a luxury of the well-to-do."

"Ah—there you're wrong! Romance, my boy, can be your strongest ally, so long as you govern it with common sense. Romance is the imagination, the reaching-beyond—that makes all the difference between a great man of business and a little one. It 'ud surprise you, maybe, to hear a lawyer describe himself as a romantic? Well, there you are"—he pointed to the little ship. "There's romance; the romance of my life. Ships! I've never wanted another."

"Happy the man who can combine his pleasures with his profits—but——"

"Shall I tell you how it is with a ship?" pursued Shergill, relentless upon the track of his hobby. "I'll tell you. A ship fills all your waking and sleeping hours with divine uncertainty. The wind shifts, and you wonder if she's in its track; you see the North Star from your window, and think of the helmsman setting his course by its light: news comes of a wreck, and you shiver for the cargo that stands for the better part of your fortune. There's not an hour of the day or night that your soul's in peace, till she comes up the river—maybe with her bulwarks patched, and some damned corsair's cannon-ball lodged in her bows!"

Matthew drew a deep breath and his hands clutched his kneecaps; for an instant he closed his eyes. He too had dreamed of these things, but what the devil was the use of dreaming? He returned to the attack.

"I put it straight to you. Has my grandfather left me anything?"

Shergill drained and replenished his glass before replying.

"Clay's got the will, ain't he? He's the proper person to ask."

"If he is—it's evident you know something." Ignoring a movement of

deprecation, he continued, "And you're not the only one. The tale's round Bristol, that Jason's not got all he expected."

Shergill's eyes went to the door; he cleared his throat, and raised his voice as he answered:

"Tt-tt. Is that what they're saying? Well, there ain't a few 'ud be gratified to hear of his disappointment. An unpop'lar fella; a damned unsociable, psalm-singing fella; damme if I know how Hercules begat him—or t'other, that's in the Indias. Do you ever have news of your uncle Jonathan?"

Matthew consigned his uncle Jonathan to perdition?"

"You think there's no truth in the story?"

"That your grandfather's left you money?" The big, bladder-like head rolled doubtfully. "Harries!" he bawled, and a little old man came shambling through the door; he had been a clerk with Shergill's father, and decades of association with the law had dried his skin to the colour of old parchment; his eyes were pin-points in the cross hatching of the innumerable lines that charted his narrow face. "Harries, you hear all that goes on in Bristol: have ye heard any tales about Mr. Hercules' will?"

Harries moved his head faintly, his lips moved as though they grudged the utterance of each syllable.

"No."

"Nothing new—nothing unexpected? All right; you can send the others home—and fetch me the keys before you go."

While a clatter of feet and banging of desk lids and doors went on in the outer office, Shergill told Matthew:

"I know of a will your grandfather made, seven or eight years ago, when his heart was in the business and Jason was in his good graces. And, mind ye—no wonder! The year he took over, the gross profits ran to nine thousand over the top figure in previous balances. A few years later, he tripled 'em. Hercules liked that; it helped to make up for having a son he couldn't in his heart abide. He told me several times he'd misjudged Jason, and he'd have to find a way of showing he was sorry—sorry, do you get me, for hating his own flesh and blood. He'd always refused to take Jason into partnership, and it was a sore point between 'em, though Jason was too sly to harp on it."

"Have you any notion what grandfather was worth?"

"At a hazard—between three and four hundred thousand; maybe more, maybe less. It'll be a difficult will to prove—good-night, Tomkins—because all Hercules' ventures wasn't, as you might say, open and above board—he didn't care to have people know what he was doing. 'Twasn't the timberyard alone; it was his private interests, that only a few of us shared."

"God above!" groaned Matthew. "And the whole of it goes to that Creeping Jesus!"

"Good-night, Hawkes, good-night, Simmons," said Shergill to the clerks, who tipped their hats to him from the door. "Mind you, he regretted it. He and Jason didn't get friendlier as time went on, and I've heard him swear, if it wasn't for the business, he'd leave the lot to charity. He went so far, he told me, as to put in a codicil or two—Burmester and Peddy and me, we were all to have something, for the sake of old times. And Burmester's wife—she was in it: Hercules always had a soft spot for Lyddie Casamajor, that was—and if he'd had his way, young fella," sniggered Shergill, digging

Matthew in the ribs with the snuffbox the latter had just refused, "she'd have been your mother, instead of the poor, pretty Merlyn lass. Lyddie's a damned fine woman, with a damned fine daughter—*mater pulchrâ filia pulchrior*—you must meet Miss Pallas! All the young fellas in Bristol after her—but her mother married late; they say she was waiting for James——"

"Plague take you for a drivelling old fool!" Matthew was thinking, as Harries shuffled in with the keys; he and Shergill performed what was evidently a nightly ceremony that Matthew watched with impatience: Shergill poured out two glasses of port, which employer and employee drank in silence, then, with an equally silent handshake and a tip of the hat to Matthew, the old man tottered to the door. Shergill winked at his visitor.

"Part of me inheritance. A queer bird, ain't he? Never knew Harries to use two words where one would do; but he knows all the old stuff like lines on the palm of his hand and saves me a deal o' bother."

"Well, if that's all you know about grandfather's will," said Matthew, rising, "I needn't trouble you further. I suppose I must resign myself—there's no point in denying that, notwithstanding your assistance, I am in the very devil of a mess."

Shergill had opened the door into the outer office, which the old man had closed behind him, and was raising a candle above his head, as though to assure himself that all was in order, before leaving it for the night.

"Ay, so it would appear," he agreed, and, holding the candle between himself and Matthew, seemed to scrutinize the latter's face.

"What 'ud you do in my place?" asked Matthew bluntly.

Shergill thrust out his lower lip, as though considering.

"There's but one way to get back lost money that I know of," he rumbled, "and 'tis to send more money after it."

"A simple solution—on the face of it! And supposing you've got no more to send?"

"What's in your mind?"

"Supposing I turn the question back on you? You've pledged yourself, I take it, liberally, on my account. Your prospects of recovery are small. What do *you* propose, to protect yourself?"

Instead of answering, Shergill closed and, to Matthew's surprise, locked the inner door; then, with his rolling gait, crossing to the window, closed the shutters upon the foggy darkness that pressed close to the window panes. The clock over the mantelpiece—a fine old ship's timepiece in a brass case—told the hour of seven, as he produced from a cupboard a series of bottles and, with Matthew's assistance, proceeded to the mixing of a bowl of punch. The steam of the boiling kettle, the rich, aromatic flavour of the brew, absorbed, apparently, all his attention: but Matthew, his perceptions quickened by anxiety, knew now there was more to come: that he must bear with these antics of procrastination, for the sake of what lay behind.

Shergill ladled the punch into two vast goblets of Bristol glass and raised his own, with a solemnity that communicated itself to his companion, and roused in him excitement and apprehension of he knew not what.

"Your very good health, sir. I fear I've tried your patience," he chuckled, as he allowed his gross bulk to settle in a chair, "in the last hour or so! But it's true that walls—even the walls of a lawyer's office—have ears, and

maybe I'm over-precautious. It's a trick one learns in our business . . . well, well. And I owe you an apology, my boy, for me defection of the night before last, when you were to have been my guest at dinner——"

Matthew waved this aside, with as much politeness as impatience allowed him to muster.

"A dying client——"

"Tscha!" said Shergill "Old Ortright has obliged me by 'dying' reg'lar over the last fifteen or twenty year. I've got a plaguy curious woman in my household, and one's got to prepare one's excuses. I never went near Ortright's; I rode over to see me old friend and colleague Fortune, that's retired from the Bar to a very pretty property t'other side of Brislington Hill. There's no man living knows more than he o' the twists and turns of the law, and I'm indebted to him for many a piece of good advice that's been of service to me and me clients. To speak plain"—he hawked, and a gob of spittle sizzled in the red heart of the fire—"I wasn't the only one last Sunday night that wasn't in full possession of me faculties—though I'd not admit as much to any one save you and me old friend Fortune: and I'd scratched my head a-plenty over this business——"

"What business?" snapped Matthew; the tips of his fingers were cramping towards the palms, and he sat forward on the edge of his chair.

"Cruikshank's name's good enough, but I'd as lief that t'other hadn't been Sam Rogers, that can't read the alphabet, nor make a decent cross, when it comes to signature: and 'twas on that point I approached Fortune—not wishing to raise hopes that might be doomed to disappointment on some little piddling point o' jurisprudence——"

The silence throbbed; a coal dropped and broke into glowing embers on the hearth. Matthew's heart was thudding against his breastbone.

Shergill heaved sideways in his chair, and producing, with a convulsion, from his breeches pocket, a bunch of keys, thrust one into the desk at his elbow. With movements of agonizing slowness, he shuffled through a batch of papers; produced, at last, the one he sought.

"For your sake, my boy," he was rumbling, "I wish it had come about more orderly: for 'tis folly to deny there'll be a mort o' prejudice surrounding the circumstances, and yer uncle Jason ain't likely to give in without a struggle. All the same——" He heaved and shook himself to his feet, and the hand that came to rest on Matthew's shoulder conveyed more conviction, through its heavy, trembling pressure, than the paper he placed between the latter's shaking fingers. . . .

CHAPTER IX

I

THEY buried Hercules Flood at eight of the night on the Friday following his death, and, judged even by Bristol standards, it was a bumper funeral.

Since the first streak of a pale primrose dawn, the city and waterways—where every ship carried its flag at half-mast—had echoed with the tolling of bells, and, when darkness stole upon the belfries, the faint gleam of lantern-light, slotting their sides with yellow, told of the ringers' fortitude, while the great bells still swung overhead, launching their dolorous message from parish to parish and drawing the curious or sympathetic from outlying districts to witness the tremendous pomps with which a Flood was laid to rest.

The fog had cleared, and from Brislington to Brandon Hill the flame of the torches traced the progress of the cortège as it came creaking, slipping and lurching down Park Street, to cross the harbour, whose waters blazed for a moment smoky red with the reflected flambeaux—accompanied by the shrill, uneven chant of the Redcliff scholars who headed the procession. These, as it moved into the town, paid less attention to their singing than to the stones with which they had slyly lined the pockets of their gowns: for, in accordance with the disgraceful custom of the times, the rabble which poured from the alleys to witness the spectacle, soon started to break through its escort, to snatch at the rich adornments of the hearse. By the time the vast catafalque had reached the Redcliff Hill, there were few remaining of the tassels of bullion, silvered wreaths and so forth, that had blazoned the heavy black velvet pall when it left the Lodge; even the hatchments had vanished in the confusion caused by the plunging of the horses which, alarmed by the stone-throwing of the Redcliff boys, took all of the coachman's skill to control them, and to prevent the hearse and its contents being flung into the gutters. The coachman, blood running down his cheek from a cut under one eye, wig and tricorn gone, stood up on his box, lashing and cursing profusely; Matthew and Ralph Burmester, riding one on either side of the hearse, swung and spurred their horses on the mob—but the mob was agile and determined. Such affairs as these were part of their perquisites, and it would have taken cannon to disperse them. They cheerfully risked trampling to death for the chance of securing a scrap of the precious metals that would assure them their share in the funeral celebrations; a few of the more drunken and shameless even snatched at the plumes wobbling between the horses' ears, and mopped and mowed like savages in the torchlight, with these epicidial adornments thrust into their own headgear.

The more orderly sections of the mob booed their disapproval of these antics, but took no measures against them: were they not part of every important funeral, and of the spectacle they had all come out to see? There would be a few arrests, and the magistrates would have a busier time than usual in the morning; meanwhile, as the procession moved on, every eye was riveted upon the coaches, of which there were more than fifty—a dearth of black

horses being atoned for by the ponderous sable caparisons that concealed most of the piebald, the chestnut and the grey.

In the first of the coaches, Jason and his family invested the occasion with all appropriate melancholy, by a display of black-bordered linen handkerchiefs; the second held, in solitary state, Jonathan's representative, a little, shiny-skinned, tight-lipped person, to be identified at fifty yards as a member of the legal profession. The third, from whose windows poured such volumes of smoke that it was thought at one moment to be alight, and a cry of "Fire!" was raised by several onlookers, held John Peddy, Tom Shergill and the Cruikshanks, all burning the incense he loved best to the memory of old Hercules, and enlivening the tedium and discomfort of the journey with the pipes which provided a smoke-screen for their private sentiments. And so on and so forth—including all the guilds, societies and companies in which Hercules had interests, the coaches tailed far away into the night, followed on foot by workmen, apprentices and the old men from the Flood almshouses, in suits of new black. It is to be hoped that the reluctant limbs of the last-named were rendered more elastic by the prospect of the refreshment which awaited them at the end of their journey.

But the main interest of the procession—at least from the feminine point of view—centred in the figure which rode on the left of the hearse. Matthew Flood's return was by now known throughout the town, and the attention of all to whom it was not already familiar was greedily riveted upon that high, imperious profile which, turning neither to right nor left, symbolized in some fashion that went deep into the consciousness of many of the onlookers the might, majesty and power for which the name of Flood had so long stood in Bristol. It was generally considered a pity that Matthew should not continue to represent it.

Not a few—particularly among Jason's friends—took as an act of insolence this public assumption of rights that belonged to the heir; but Jason could hardly have ridden, had he chosen; he was a wretched horseman, never trusting himself except to the spavined nag, too spiritless to give trouble, that bore him on his business rounds. It was remarked that Jason's face at the coach window was as vicious as a rat's, as he observed the interest roused by Matthew's action.

Yet it was with no insolent intent that Matthew had chosen to ride. His relationships with his family being what they were, the question of his accompanying them in the coach had not arisen; nor did he care for the alternative of sharing the second coach with Jonathan's man of law. It was he who had persuaded Ralph Burmester to share with him the duties of mounted escort, partly in order that his own part might not be too conspicuous, partly because he had been warned of the barbarities that usually accompanied Bristol funerals. Ralph, an excellent horseman, had accepted stiffly, though not without gratification, the office which Matthew suggested, only stipulating that the matter should be submitted to Jason for his approval, before giving his final assent: and Jason, not knowing of the second escort, had lugubriously tendered his thanks for the offer.

Magnificently mounted upon a tall black horse, his cloak of sable velvet, lined and faced with stiff satin, spread across its hindquarters, the ribbons and crop gathered into his left hand and the right resting lightly, as though

by accident, upon the hilt of his sword, Matthew's face, by the light of the torches, was remembered by many. Still as marble, white except for the black bar of his brows, stiff in lip and jaw, it went through the night like a death-mask. Even in attacking the sacrilegious rabble, it never altered; there was something inhuman and frightful in that stone-cold face, as he spurred his horse on to its hind legs, to strike at the mob with its flashing hooves; the blade in his hand was the more terrible for being wielded so passionlessly.

The service took a long time; the oration, pronounced by Bishop Yonge, even longer. The great Flood vault yawned to receive the mortal remains of another of its tenants, while the lights of candles twinkled all over the graveyard, packed from end to end with the motionless and silent throng. Down the Redcliff Hill one could have walked on the heads of the people, as between earth and stars floated the last, sweet dirge of the choristers, that ended with the last note of the bells.

II

At it was manifestly impossible for many of the huge gathering to make their way back to Brandon Hill, the mourners repaired to Jason's house in Queen Square, where, all unwillingly, he was constrained, by the terms of the instructions left to Clay, no less than by public opinion, to conform to the ceremonial of Hercules' circle; and, for the first and only time during the Jason Floods' tenancy, the usually meagre board groaned with victuals reluctantly provided in accordance with what was expected at the funeral of a city father.

It must have taken a degree of imperviousness to do full justice to that lavish entertainment, with Jason at the head of the board, sour as a green apple, and jealously resentful of every glass emptied and refilled! It is sad to relate that even some of the "brethren," tempted beyond their strength by the luscious scents of sucking pig, of boiled turkey and lark pie, forsook their sworn abstemiousness, to engage, as deeply as any, in the lusts of the palate. Deference to a reluctant host was forgotten, as the wine gained power over minds and muscles, and as it became increasingly apparent that authority was slipping from his hands, Jason, disgusted, left the company, catching, as he did so, the eye of Clay, who rose and followed him to the door.

"In the name of decency, let this be finished as soon as possible! Can't the will be read now?"

"Certainly, Mr. Flood. I will advise the one or two whom it concerns and join you presently."

"We shall be upstairs, in the parlour," muttered Jason, as he stepped into the hall—whose blaze of unwonted light stabbed him anew in his economies. As he closed the door, Matthew rose from the chest on which he had been seated. He looked down at his uncle, and, for once, there was nothing either insolent or mocking in his gaze.

"Uncle, I should like to have a word with you."

"I have nothing whatever to say to you," snapped Jason.

"Uncle," said Matthew again. "God knows there is no reason for me

to consider your feelings, any more than you have ever considered mine. Yet——"

"Your presence during the last week has been sufficient of an outrage," babbled Jason, "and any talk of consideration on your part can be no more than vain protestation, so far as I and my family are concerned! I am informed that I cannot forbid you to be present at the will-reading——"

"In that case," broke in Matthew, "there is nothing more to be said. I will only ask you to remember that I would have spared you—something—if I could."

Jason stared after the tall figure that strode out into the dark, slamming the door behind it. Was the fellow not going to hear the will read, after all? He felt some annoyance—almost as much as he had felt on hearing that Matthew insisted upon his family rights; it had pleased him, in one way, to imagine him sitting there, swallowing his bile, while the terms of the will underlined his exclusion from the benefits of the house of Flood.

Ann Flood and her daughters, sitting in their mourning panoply in the dimly lighted parlour, looked up as the head of the family entered; a pathetic trio, their red eyes were heavy with sleep. The prospect of riches meant nothing to Ann save her lust for charity; Miss Amelia and Miss Michal, poor girls, could not be expected to rejoice in a fortune which would bring little to them beyond an extension of their almsgiving activities. "Do you think Papa would allow me to buy just one new gown?" Michal had whispered wistfully; she was not yet as resigned as her sister to the demands of religion. Amelia shook her head decidedly. "You should know Papa better, sister, than to think he would encourage us in useless frivolity," she retorted severely.

Lawyer Clay entered, followed by a little company, which was stiffly acknowledged by the family.

"Allow me, ladies, to present Mr. Jernigan, of the firm Rice, Jernigan and Grylls, of London—representing the interests of Mr. Jonathan Flood," he said importantly; unease shifted his eye as he added: "Mr. Shergill, whom you know, tells me he has been instructed by Mr. Matthew Flood to be present on his account."

Jason bit back an exclamation, nodding coldly. Shergill, in his opinion, was one of the least desirable of his father's acquaintances: just the one, no doubt, whom Matthew would choose to add to the affront of his own presence. Shergill was bowing blandly, seemingly oblivious of the fact that he was unwelcome, removing the traces of his interrupted meal from the fronts of his waistcoat. His rolling gait carried him to the fireplace, where he allowed his bulk to fall into the arm-chair which Clay had intended for his own occupation. Clay glared; Shergill bowed and smiled.

The others found their places with varying degrees of diffidence in distanter parts of the room; Ralph Burmester was there, on his wife's account; he knew there was nothing for him in the will. Peddy and Fordyce avoided each other's eyes, and stood well apart. The Cruikshank brothers, who were notorious for their curiosity, were represented by the elder; Simon, to his brother's mystification, had pleaded sudden illness and hurried home to bed.

A profound hush fell upon the company, as Lawyer Clay opened his brief-case to extract the fateful document. A fussy man, loving formalities, he took as long as possible about it: blowing his nose, clearing his throat, altering

the position of candles and settling his coat-tails in so prolonged a fashion that Tom Shergill, sunk in his flesh, but less at ease than his appearance suggested, was moved to grunt:

"You needn't draw it out so long, Clay; there's no more company coming."

"I had not expected any, Mr. Shergill!" retorted the other, glaring over the tops of his spectacles.

"Your pardon. I thought maybe you were waiting for my client—who's decided not to be present."

"We are waiting for no one, Mr. Shergill," emphasized Jason's lawyer, and, with a final trumpeting, embarked upon the reading of the fateful document.

It was impossible, even for those who were prepared, not to be impressed by the formidable record of Hercules Flood's fortune, which exceeded in bulk Shergill's previous estimate. The will took the better part of an hour to read, though the charitable bequests were fewer and smaller than those customary among Bristol testators, and Lawyer Clay found it necessary to remind his audience that the late Mr. Flood's beneficence during his lifetime was so well known that it was unnecessary to comment on the relatively small sums he had dedicated to post-mortem charities.

The personal bequests were even fewer, and obviously dictated by sentiment rather than with the intention of benefiting the receivers. John Peddy and Tom Shergill ("my oldest friends") were to receive the sum of five hundred pounds, "in memory of our ventures." To Lydia Burmester was left a quantity of jewellery, "the property of my late wife—since I have no daughter to inherit, and it is inconceivable that either of my sons should find use for ornaments of that flesh they profess to despise!" If a tear dropped into poor Miss Michal's lap, no one observed it, and she covered it quickly with her handkerchief.

"The remainder and bulk of my fortune is left to my son Jason, in consideration of his estimable labours on the company's behalf, and for the upkeep and extension of the business in which he has shown so far a sagacity which I advise him to apply to his private affairs."

"Is that all?" questioned Jason sharply, after silence had fallen.

"That is all, Mr. Flood; permit me to congratulate you, and to wish you all happiness and fortune in your new estate," said Clay fussily.

There were murmurs of acquiescence in this well-wishing; Jason stood silent, biting his thumb. All turned towards Shergill as he came lumbering to his feet, wiping, a trifle ostentatiously, traces of moisture from his eyes.

"It is no more than natural—I'm sure Jack Peddy will agree with me—to be moved by our old friend's token of regard! 'Tis not the gift itself, but the wish that sweetens the gift," he declared, beaming on the assembly, which was slow to respond to his sentiments: for it was well known in Bristol that, when Lawyer Tom evoked sentiment, he was most dangerous. Even Ralph Burmester looked suspiciously towards the bulky figure which, as though by accident, had assumed the middle of the floor. "Perhaps, sir, you will allow me, on my client's behalf, to put a question."

"I deny my nephew's right to ask questions!" snapped out Jason, to be rebuked by a lift of his lawyer's eyebrows.

"Your question, sir?"

"On my client's behalf, sir, I should be obliged if you would quote me the date of the will you have just read."

"The date of the will," said Clay coldly, "is the eleventh day of May, in the year 1753. By this will my client revoked three previous wills, made respectively in the years——"

"Never mind the years," said Shergill, and drew his hand out of his pocket; a cold hush fell upon the assembly. "For the will I have here, made on November the sixth, in the year 1760, revokes all—I say *all*—the others."

A scream came from Ann Flood. Jason, crouching, clutching the mantel-piece like one who fears to call, cried out:

"What is this trickery?"

"Nay, nay, there's no trickery," wheezed Shergill, fumbling in his turn with the paper. "Signed, sealed and witnessed, as you'll observe, this will was made by my old friend Hercules Flood, in full possession of his wits and faculties—as Fordyce there is prepared to vouch for."

"That, by heaven, is a lie! For the last twelve months we have sought, on account of my father's failing intelligence, to obtain a power of attorney——"

"Sought? But you didn't get it, did you? And 'twill be difficult to prove 'failing intelligence' with a dozen witnesses to swear the contrary. D'you remember, Burmester? 'The Scarlet-coloured cock, my lord likes best——'? Does a man of 'failing intelligence' quote a dozen lines of verse without a single breakdown?"

"I prefer," said Ralph coldly, "not to be asked for my opinion."

"Egad!" sniggered Cruikshank, "I don't mind giving mine! If Hercules' intelligence was waning, then clap me in a strait-jacket and take me to Bedlam: for I was no more sane than he."

"Gentlemen! The discussion of these questions may be left to the future." Jealous of his authority, Lawyer Clay had risen, with a dark flush in his cheeks, to face Shergill. "I presume my worthy colleague"—the tone converted the words into an insult—"is prepared to publish to us the contents of his so-called will?"

"Me friend Clay," sneered Shergill, "appears to think he's the only lawyer in Bristol qualified to draw up a testament! I congratulate you, sir, on the fine, imposin' document you've drawn up—at so much pains to yourself, and, no doubt, some profit at the same time! Our own, though less imposin' and lackin' the ornaments on which, no doubt, you pride yourself—is no less bindin' in the eyes of the law. Ladies and gentlemen—see for yourselves!" It is not to be doubted that Shergill was enjoying the drama, as he unrolled and held out at arm's length, for the inspection of all, a document, stark in its brevity, that smote to silence all the beholders.

"*All to my grandson, Matthew Flood.*

"Signed: HERCULES FLOOD.

"In the presence of witnesses: SIMON CRUIKSHANK.

X SAM SOMERS (his mark).

"On the 6th day of November, 1760."

There was none present who did not recognize Hercules' hand, or the

autocratic emphasis that the double underlining gave to the word "All." That double underlining was a trick that any of his shipmasters could have identified, from their correspondence with their owner: the first line thick and passionate, forcing the points of the quill apart, the second thin, like a shadow below the first. It was a trick which, of course, it would have been possible to forge, or imitate: less easy the writing, which, though wavering, a caricature of its original self, bore still those individual traces that evade the hand of the forger.

Clay was the first of the company to recover his composure.

"It would have been gentlemanly of you, sir, to have informed us of the existence of this will, before the reading of the other!"

"Gentlemanliness, sir, is a quality that flourishes only when it meets its equal. You and your client, so I'm informed, haven't been any too gentlemanly to my client in the past. Moreover, your will-reading saved me asking a lot of questions that we've reason to believe you might be disobliging about answering!"

"Clay, we'll contest this will!" Jason was saying, through tight lips. Clay, his own lips compressed, nodded his head. Amelia and Michal made a concerted rush to support their mother; for once that steely warrior was shaken! In common with the majority of her sex, Ann Flood had a horror of legal procedure; she believed, as most women of her age and class believed, that to go to law was to invite disaster. Lawyers existed, in her opinion, only to defraud one of one's rights. Shivering, snivelling, she sobbed on her daughters' shoulders, 'feeling that all was lost. The girls were no less terrified, on beholding the collapse of the one whom they had come to regard as the more invincible of their parents. Shergill, rolling a wise eye in Ann Flood's direction, thought, "We've got 'em. Jason ain't strong enough to carry on by himself."

"Most certainly we'll contest the will," Jason was repeating; he thumped the mantelpiece with his clenched fist—the gesture of an uncertain man.

"Contest it all ye please," nodded Shergill, "but let me warn you for your own good: you'll not find it so easy to overthrow."

"What?" sneered Clay. "It's the most glaring instance of undue influence that has ever come within my experience."

"Well, you've got to prove that." Shergill rubbed his nose reflectively. "It'll take some doing—partic'larly as my client didn't know of its existence until last night."

"You expect us to believe that?" spat Jason.

It was Ralph Burmester who unexpectedly supported Shergill's statement. His rigid sense of justice triumphing over his dislike for Matthew, and his intense distaste for being involved in any affair like the present, he came forward to say:

"I, for one, am prepared to accept Lawyer Shergill's word. His client and I spoke of the matter one day; I was obliged to inform him that his name did not appear in the earlier will—the only one I knew of—and he appeared, and was, greatly crestfallen."

"He was lying!" Ann controlled herself to whine, with the contempt of the female for masculine gullibility.

"With all due respect to you, ma'am, I prefer to trust my own judgment of when a man is lying and when he is not," said Ralph stiffly.

"He was always a liar, even as a child!"

"I should be sorry to stake my credit, on many occasions, on your nephew's veracity; but in this matter I am persuaded that he spoke the truth. With your leave, ladies, I will wish you good-night."

"And if you want any additional testimony to that," said Shergill, when he had recovered from his surprise at Burmester's unlooked-for support, "I can give you the precise words my client used when I broke the news to him yesterday evening. 'By God!' he said. 'It is not true! It is not true!' Half a dozen times he repeated it, till I began to think I'd never get it driven into his head."

"And why, may we ask, did you conceal this—if I may put it so—vital information from your client for so long, sir? It would seem more natural, in view of his anxiety, to relieve his mind at the first possible opportunity."

"Though I deny your right to question my methods of dealing with my clients," said Shergill, not unpleasantly—for it is easy to be pleasant when the wind blows from the right direction, and old Roger Fortune had made him sure of his ground, "I'll gratify your curiosity. In the first place, 'twas a matter we didn't wish to publish all over Bristol till t'other chatter had died down; and, my client being a headstrong young fellow, we couldn't be sure how he would take it."

"Excuse me, sir: you use the plural. Have you a partner?"

"The royal plural!" smirked Shergill, who could have bitten his tongue out for the slip. "'Tis a privilege our profession shares, as I needn't remind you, with crowned heads. As it seems to confuse you, sir, I'll confine myself to the singular in future. My second reason was, that I considered it 'ud do no harm to safeguard my client's prospects, at the expense of his tranquillity. In other words, the longer he was kept hoppin' about on the grid, the easier it 'ud be to prove he hadn't had a finger in the pie! I wager there's a score of persons that can witness to my client's state of mind through the whole of this week—which, to put it plain, wasn't the state of mind of a fellow who'd just come into a fortune."

"Mountebanking!" sneered Jason.

"I fail to see, sir," said Clay, flashing a glance of warning at his client, "that your client's state of mind gives proof of his lack of complicity. On the contrary, it would seem to suggest that he was uncertain whether or not his influence over the deceased had succeeded in establishing itself, before the death took place."

"Have it your own way," said Shergill. "I've got two good witnesses to testify to the circumstances under which this will was made: which, speaking plainly, were circumstances of a kind our friend there might prefer not to have blazoned the length and breadth o' Bristol. If you're prepared to go to law, we'll meet you, with pleasure. But it's only fair to say we've taken our precautions—not to mention counsel's opinion. This will's in order—as your man of affairs is well aware, Mr. Flood; and all the flourishes and twirls of law-writer's hand 'udn't make it more so!"

"Let me tell you, sir, you've played a damned unprofessional, dastardly trick," cried Clay, losing his temper.

III

While the lawyers bickered, while Jason endeavoured, through the frenzy of his spirit, to calm his wife's hysterics, and the funeral guests, relieved of their host's unconvivial presence, drank on, unwitting of the thunderbolt presently to be launched upon them, Matthew stood in the graveyard of the Redcliff, forcing his mind to grasp what had happened to him.

Ever since the previous night, his brain seemed paralysed. He stood beside the closed vault, on the trampled earth that the feet of multitudes had churned into mud, and ground the palms of his hands upon the icy stone, as though seeking through sensual shock to galvanize those faculties whose use had departed from him with Shergill's announcement. Seeking some appropriate emotion, he found none; it was as though he had been voided of the capacity to feel.

For twenty-four hours he had spoken to no one; his morning had been spent in exploring, as in a dream, scenes which, although familiar, had taken on strangeness, viewed through the glass of possession in which, so far, he could neither believe nor disbelieve. It was the kind of thing that did not happen, save in the old-fashioned, chivalresque novels written for and read by women: the beggar, set suddenly on horseback, to ride, so the legend went, to the devil.

The only emotion of which he seemed capable was pride—pride that forbade him to exhibit, even to Shergill, anything of the convulsion which, for a second or two, had ravished him, to pass out, leaving him empty. He did not know that he had gone white to the lips, or remember Shergill's putting a glass into his hand, from which he drank, somewhat too hastily: for the cognac, burning his throat, had forced from him a cough, that he managed to turn into a short laugh, as he remarked, "Well, it seems as though the age of miracles were not yet over!"—and left, not knowing, or caring, where his feet took him.

It was a good gesture, this, of indifference: yet, if it pierced down into the soul—? Among other fantastical thoughts that, in the long night watches, took possession of an unfantastical brain, was one about selling one's soul to the devil. He could not recall any such transaction: yet it seemed as though he had bartered, for a fortune, all his powers of sorrow and joy, of thinking or acting in a normal fashion. He walked, a ghost, in a world of men.

He had gained, in one blasting second, all he had most desired; the kingdoms of the earth were his, and, with them, all the adventures and opportunities he had bitterly envied. How differently, he would have said himself, he would have received this news! To be standing here, in silence and solitude, beside the tomb of a dead man—he would have laughed and cursed the idea to perdition. Supposing the news had come to him in London—he could imagine too well the fashion in which he would have celebrated it. But here, in Bristol, upon his own earth, it brought a different message: a message that teased him with its elusiveness. For some reason, he *dared* not deliver himself to it—to its strange echoes of premonition and warning, that sounded through the wilder motif of victory.

As he stood there, pressing his hands upon the stone, as though through

it, he could make contact with that perverse old spirit that, in a moment of caprice, had chosen to transform the whole of his existence, the sound of a ship's syren came up from the river. Words came back to his mind:

"A ship fills all of your waking and sleeping hours with divine uncertainty. The wind shifts, and you wonder if she's in its track; news comes of a wreck, and you shiver for the cargo that stands for the better part of your fortune. . ."

Matthew's lips parted; he shifted, stirred, and it was as though the life came back to him on a shivering sigh. The Backs! He'd go down to the Backs—and find Abiathar—and tell him—and tell him of all that the future held for them both! Then let the night take its course—and to-morrow, O blest and radiant to-morrow!—he would go to the Burmesters and make sure of Pallas. A thousand complications might lie between this moment and the realization of his joys, but these seemed trifles light as thistledown upon the sudden buoyancy of his spirit.

A few drowsy citizens were roused by the clatter of horses' hooves, and a few night wanderers gaped with curiosity after the great black rider who, scattering sparks from his horse's heels, galloped over the hill. Down on the Backs there was silence; only the splash of a water-rat, the howl of an amorous tom, the faint creaking and bumping of the small craft as it sagged upon the lapping tide. The riding lights made magic of the harbour; reining his horse, Matthew stood stock still, an equestrian study in basalt under the uncertain moon, that made ragged silver in the sky. Above him towered the great wooden palaces, fantastically and beautifully shaped, with their tangled forests of mast and rigging bared to the moonlight: each a symbol of its owner's dreams, the visible and tangible proof of his power to transform dream to reality. On a soft night wind the smell of salt and iodine blew into Matthew's face. . . .

I V

Never was there such a clattering of milkmaids' pails, such an early morning bustle, as on the day following Hercules Flood's funeral. Getting the news from the households whose representatives had had the good fortune to be present at the announcement, the cries of "Milk-O!" preceded their utterers up the hills, carrying some note of excitement that flung casements wider than usual and brought mistresses as well as maids to scullery doors, to learn the meaning of this strange agitation.

Miss Orabella Burmester, usually a sleepy-head, and prone to lie among her pillows until Pallas dragged them away, was inevitably the first to be roused by some unusual bustle that was taking place below her window.

"Pally—Pally: what's going on?" Sitting up to listen, she thumped her sister on the shoulder. It was still quite dark, and only a pale blur betrayed the movement of Pallas's head on the pillow.

"Oh dear, why did you have to wake me? I was having such a lovely dream—"

"Of Matthew, I'll be bound," sagaciously observed Orabella, as she bounded out of bed. "Oh, goodness, it's perishing! Lend me your fur slippers—I left my own on the other side of the bed. Hang it, the glass is frosted—I can't see a thing!"

"Orry! You're never going to open the window! We shall both die of cold."

"I can't help it—I'd sooner die of cold than unrequited curiosity. Oh, la, there's Sukey the milkmaid, and all the servants around her, jabbering like fowls in a barnyard: I can't hear a word they're saying—what can it be?"

Dragging the coverlet off the bed, Pallas ran to wrap it round the shivering little figure; their two nightcapped heads strained out into the dank darkness, and their ears strained to the conversation.

"—every penny! I tell you 'tis the truth! I had it from Betsy Cribb, that's got it from her mistress only this morning." It was the first clear sentence that rose to the listening girls.

"Got *what* from her mistress?" cried out the indomitable Orabella, and there was a shriek from below.

"Miss Orry! For pity's sake go back to bed. You'll catch your death——"

"Never mind my death: what's Betsy Cribb told Sukey—that you're all so excited about?"

Sukey's hardened lungs, dominating the others with the assertion of her right to the news she had brought, trumpeted the tidings up the wall.

"Tis old Mester Flood's will, miss! Jason ain't got a penny—and young Mester Matthew's got the lot."

"Oh, my poor heart!" gasped Orabella. "I vow I shall swoon."

"Not while I'm here—and the window open," said Pallas, drawing the casement to with a bang.

"Pally, didn't you hear what she said?"

"Yes . . . I heard."

"Pon my honour, you're the coldest, hardest-hearted thing I ever knew!" complained Orabella, as she scrambled back to bed. "Here am I—nothing to Matthew, and I'm sure he's nothing to me—and my heart's going like a hammer—it's enough to suffocate me. For the love of God, Pallas Burmester, are you a fish?"

"Oh, Orry, Orry; why won't you understand? All of your feelings burst out of you like fountains, while mine——"

Penitent, as usual, Orabella stretched out her hand in the dark, and touched, by accident, her sister's mouth.

"What's the matter, Pally? Are you ill? Your mouth's all wet——!"

"I fear I have bitten my lip," confessed Pallas; she was scratching for a light; presently the candle flared. Orabella gave a shriek and buried her face in her pillow.

"Oh, oh! Your chin's all covered with blood! Wash it away—wash it away!"

Pallas obeyed, trembling so. between cold and excitement, that she could hardly handle the ewer; she came back to bed, to be clasped shivering in her sister's arms.

"Oh, my darling! Now everything is going to come right—just like a fairy tale. For even though Papa doesn't like Matthew, I'm sure he loves you much too dearly to stand in the way of your happiness with a man who can make such splendid provision for you!"

"Oh, Orry, you mercenary little wretch——!"

"Well, but you know that was quite half of Papa's objection. He hated

to think of you living on Matthew's wits—of which I don't think he has much opinion. I am sure he will be quite reconciled when he realizes you as mistress of that lovely house and so close—so close to your devoted Orry! That's the best of all," Orabella assured her, with an ecstatic hug.

"You're s-sure you don't want me r-right out of the w-way?" shivered Pallas, unable, even in this poignant moment, to resist the tender raillery that came as naturally to her as the air she breathed.

"Of course I don't! Because you would never be horrid and unprincipled, like some married women, and steal girls' sweethearts right from under their noses. Oh, darling, do get warm; you're making my teeth rattle with your shivering."

"It's not all cold," confessed Pallas. "You know, Orry—it's f-frightening, in a way—why, we h-hardly know each other! We've o-only spoken th-three times—and it—it seems so a-absurd——!"

"Goodness, Pally, you're not being maidenly, are you? And with all the experience you've had!" reproached Orabella. "I'm sure one couldn't wonder if it was me—that's never had a proper declaration so far. But you—who've been proposed to at least once a week, ever since you left the schoolroom——"

"What a scandalous invention!"

"Well, nearly as often as that. You ought not to be bashful at the prospect of marriage with the passion of your life."

"I'm not in the least bashful," declared Pallas. "But it is one of the unfortunate defects in my character that I cannot help seeing the faults, as clearly as the virtues, of those I love. In fact, the more I love them, the more sharply I become aware of those blemishes which, instead of diminishing, only increase my affection. It is only towards those to whom I am essentially indifferent that I manage to maintain a mild, uncritical benevolence, that does them no more good, poor things, than it does to me! I see quite clearly, for instance, that you, whom I adore, are a vain, flighty and often selfish little thing——"

"Thank you very much," said Miss Orabella.

"And I do not mind, I even cherish these defects!—because, without them, you would be altogether too perfect, with your sweet temper and grace and way of laughing at everything, and your devotion to your tiresome sister!"

"I wish I could think of some real, downright faults in you," sighed Orabella. "The trouble is, that you never give me real cause to complain of you, except, occasionally, when you order me about——"

"And you disobey, so that makes that level!" returned Pallas. "And you see, in Matthew, it is the same thing. I love dearly a person who is vain, selfish and unreliable—and of whom I'm not even persuaded, as I am in your case, dear Orry, that he would die rather than hurt me in any way."

"I believe you're a voluptuary," startlingly observed Orabella.

"In what way do you mean?"

"I believe you'd positively enjoy being hurt by Matthew, so long as you felt it gave him pleasure. For all your strong-mindedness, Pally, you're frightfully feminine; and women adore to be martyred by the men they love."

"I believe I could stand any amount of martyrdom, so long as it was me, and not my ideas, that were being martyred," said Pallas slowly. "I don't believe I care how much people hurt my body or even my feelings, so long

as they don't hurt my mind. This part—here”—she tapped her brow—“seems to be the tenderest thing about me; I think it may be so in all women. For, you know, Orry, women have only just started to grow minds.”

“For my part,” said Orabella, “I think a heart is quite tiresome enough; and if I started to bother about my mind I should soon be distracted. Besides, what use is mind to a woman? She is so seldom permitted to exercise it, even if she wants to. And I'd much prefer to let my husband make up my mind for me, and save argument.”

“I believe you'd make a better wife for Matthew than me,” said Pallas sadly. “For I fear—oh, so greatly fear, Orry—that he will some day resent my mind.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” asked practical Orabella. “I know what I should do in your place: I should just pretend to be as frivolous and thoughtless as the majority of women, and keep the rest for my own private amusement. I'm sure that's what a great many women do; I believe that's how Mama gets on so well with Papa.”

“Alas, I'm afraid I've not got Mama's art for repressing my private opinions,” sighed poor Pallas.

“Has Matthew been snubbing you for your private opinions?”

“No, no! But once—he thought I was foolish; I could see it in his smile. That damned, humouring smile that men give to pretty women!” Pallas gritted her teeth. “If he did it again, I doubt if I could control my feelings. And yet—oh, Orry, life would be empty without him! There is something in him that calls to the same in me—and I shall never, never be content until I have borne Matthew's children!”

●

CHAPTER X

I

DURING the succeeding weeks, that is to say, over Christmas and well into the new year, Bristol held its breath and riveted its eyes on Triton Lodge and its solitary occupant. Matthew having established himself there, it was difficult for Jason to turn him out; in fact, he was warned against it by Clay, who had, however, sufficient tact not to inform him that the current of public opinion, though fluctuating from time to time, ran fairly steadily in Matthew's favour, and against the Queen Square branch of the family. Jason had too long been an unpopular figure, too prone to arrogate superiority on moral, if not on social, grounds, to command much sympathy in the hour of his trial; and although Matthew had not been in Bristol long enough to have inspired much personal attachment, his outward parts, at least, commended him to those who had the romantic figure of James still well in mind, and to whom Hercules had stood for a tradition to which, on the face of it, Matthew was more likely to conform than his Uncle Jason.

"But what's he living on?" whined Jason, with visions of vast accounts for fuelling and provision that he might be called upon to pay. The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"It is to be presumed that a certain number of fools are to be found who allow him credit."

"And when the case is over—shall I be responsible?"

"Nothing of the kind," Clay briskly assured his dithering client. "If people give credit upon insufficient security, the responsibility is theirs. Your nephew is no longer a minor."

"He must have found security of some sort," insisted Jason, twisting his fingers. "Who's standing it?"—*Who's my enemy?* he meant, but did not choose to put the thought into words. Clay looked sour.

"The tale's abroad that some of your father's friends—Shergill among them—are staking him. I'll not conceal my opinion from you, Mr. Flood, that it's a very ticklish position. The words of such men as Peddy, Burmester and Cruikshank carry a lot of weight in a place like this, and with them on the other side, we shall have a hard battle, when the case opens."

"You don't think there's any question of our losing?" Jason was blue about the lips, and almost prostrate with terror at the prospect.

"While English justice remains," said Clay, a little too oratorically, "I do not think that you, sir, need apprehend the awarding of the verdict to a contract made in such unsavoury circumstances. I am afraid you will find some of the evidence, relating to the manner in which the so-called will was made, painful in the extreme; I myself feel keenly the association of such matters with a name like your own, which we have been proud to have on our files for the greater part of a century." He gave a stiff little bow. "But I hope you will appreciate the importance of our leaving no stone unturned which might cause the diversion of so munificent an inheritance into improper channels."

"Go on—go on," groaned Jason. "In any case, our name is blackened for ever."

"If you will permit me to say so, I feel sure that the cleansing of the escutcheon may confidently be left in your hands, sir!" said Clay, a trifle ironically, for he was a staunch supporter of the established church, and had never approved of Jason's Methodistical side-slipping. "And, for your encouragement, I may say that our emissaries have returned from London, with a remarkable body of evidence to the personal character and activities of the person who challenges your rights. I think it very doubtful that any unprejudiced person should read the summary, which I am preparing, without coming to a definite opinion about the individual whose interests are involved."

There was some joking at Jason's expense in the coffee-houses, but not as much as might have been expected. Only the frivolous could wholly ignore the tremendous effect the closing down of the Flood timberyard (a matter which many already took for granted) would have on local employment. Even if the business was sold, it was doubtful if a new owner would care to operate on the scale Flood's had been noted for in the past: moreover, if it should go to a "foreigner," there would almost certainly be an importation of "foreign" labour: a thing the sturdy and clannish Bristolians bitterly resented—"foreigners," to them, standing less for the black, or yellow, or coffee-brown population to which they were accustomed, than for men of their own colour and race, from other parts of the British Isles. There were many anxious faces, among the humbler classes, that Jason would have been surprised to connect with his own affairs. He had never had his father's human attitude towards his employees; a workman, to Jason, was a piece of tackle that either did or did not fulfil its proper function, and, when it ceased to function, was thrown aside. If old enough, it went to rest in the Flood almshouses; if not, it was none of Jason's business. In spite of which, a job at Flood's was much sought after and well regarded, for the pay was sure, there were oddments in the way of bonus and so forth (instigated by Hercules before his retirement: such a matter would never have crossed Jason's mind) that made the hard work and the incessant driving worth while. It was curious that Jason, who could be passionate in his championship of the oppressed negro, was never known to put his hand in his pocket for a sick workman, or to spare a word of sympathy for an employee's bereavement. These are problems of human nature which have baffled its students since the beginning of time.

The timber, building and shipbuilding trades therefore, as a whole, were inclined to stand in with Jason, and, of course, he had all the body of Methodism behind him—less negligible a support than it would have been fifteen or twenty years before.

The shippers themselves, however, and a great many of the commercials whose livelihood hung upon the ocean trade, were inclined to favour Matthew; though these as a whole were cautious, and preferred to watch which way the wind blew before committing themselves to open partisanship. The fact that "Lawyer Tom" championed his cause was not as much of an advantage as might have been assumed, for Tom was generally regarded as a "slim" customer, though a genial companion and a shrewd adviser in all shipping matters, which had linked him up with people like Peddy and the Cruikshanks, whose reputations were beyond reproach.

Hoi-polloi—mainly for Matthew—gossiped its head off, and invented riotous legends for the young Flood who had appeared so dramatically in their midst. Tales circulated about the goings on at Triton Lodge, where Matthew was supposed to be entertaining his London friends, and making premature hay of the fortune which had not yet fallen into his hands. It was the only story they could invent to account for Matthew's non-appearance among them. Abiathar Crown, who could have informed them differently, was, for once, as mum as an oyster about his visits to the house. On a few occasions Matthew rode down the hill and through the town, lifting his crop gravely to the people he knew by name or sight; but these rare excursions were usually to Lawyer Shergill's office, or extended occasionally to include the harbour where he would remain on horseback, surveying the shipping, acknowledging few and conversing with none. It began to be said that he was a standoffish fellow: more like Jason than James, for all his physical parts. Maybe the money—which, someone was sure maliciously to put in, he had not yet got—had gone to his head.

But for the most part of the time he was away, galloping a horse into the country—it was said there were now at least a dozen horses in the old stables: wherein rumour, as usual, exaggerated, for Matthew, had but three, and one was Fordyce's, and was too light to support the doctor's increasing weight—always, however, within sight of the sea, and always stopping, on some lonely hilltop, to look down and out, with eyes that went beyond the horizon and saw—who knows what visions that had started to shape themselves in his mind? A lonely, and gradually, a mysterious figure Matthew became in those days, to his observers; but poison was seeping itself out of his system, and Peddy and Shergill, who had had a few anxious moments about the young man whose interests they had chosen to espouse, were not the only ones to exchange glances of gratification, as time wore on.

II

The day after the funeral, Matthew had received a setback which, more than any other factor, had contributed to the change in his habits and outlook. He had gone boldly and confidently to demand Pallas's hand from her father, and had received an unconditional refusal.

At first he was disposed to rage, to protest his rights and Pallas's to their own happiness.

"May I inquire, sir," he had the impudence to demand, "what you know about my private character, that causes you to refuse me as a suitor for your daughter's hand?"

Ralph's reply was one word, but it went like a knife through the sheath of vanity and self-assurance that Matthew was accustomed to rely on for his conquests.

"Enough," he said.

"But," stammered Matthew, "my prospects are now surely good enough."

"How so?" inquired Ralph bluntly. "They rest upon the judge's decision. No one can tell how that may go."

Matthew was silent for a while; when he spoke, it was in quite a different tone from his previous one of insolent attack.

"It is evident you think ill of me, sir," he said slowly. "But there is one matter upon which I should be glad if you would take my word. I had nothing whatever to do with the alteration of my grandfather's will."

"I have not doubted it," said Ralph.

"Then"—Matthew had the *naïveté* to appear surprised—"on what grounds do you object to me? It is—or was—hardly my fault that I was a poor man, when I first aspired to your daughter's hand."

"You seem to misunderstand me, Mr. Flood." The cold use of the title put him in his place. "The question of poverty or wealth, although naturally it enters into my plans for both my daughters' future, is not of such paramount importance as your words lead me to think it is to you. The question of their happiness, on the other hand, is the subject of my most constant thoughts—and prayers," he added, on the note of slight embarrassment which most men employ when referring to their devotions.

"Then why—" burst out Matthew again. "Won't you believe me, sir, when I assure you that the whole of our happiness—Pallas's and mine—is bound up in each other?"

"On what, may I ask, do you base that assumption? Have you and my elder daughter been meeting?"

"We have met twice, since the first time, in this house: and on each occasion the encounter was a chance one. But it was enough. You cannot accuse your daughter of deceiving you, sir, for she had no more intention of disobeying you than I of inviting your further disapproval."

"I shall speak to my daughter; for this must stop."

"I am entitled, at least, to know why you take up so uncompromising an attitude, and one so prejudicial to your daughter's future happiness!"

"Allow me to be the best judge, Mr. Flood, of my daughter's happiness! And it is perhaps enough to say that a person of your name, who leads a public existence of the kind you have been leading in London, can blame no one but himself for the notoriety which surrounds his actions."

"I see," said Matthew quietly. He rose, and picked up his crop from the table on which he had thrown it at the beginning of the interview. "It is perhaps useless to say to you, sir, that the life a man leads is largely conditioned by his circumstances. If I had enjoyed the advantages to which, in the opinion of some, I might have been entitled, I think the reports you have had of me would be somewhat different from those which, I realize, have damaged my credit in your eyes. However, such as they are, I do not deny them; nor is it necessary for me to press you for more specific accounts than those which you have chosen to give me."

Against his will, Ralph was impressed, less by the words than by the manner in which they were spoken. Matthew's tone was neither whining nor apologetic, and there was dignity in his bearing that had not been noticeable on other occasions. The thought flashed across Ralph's mind that, to some, money is a necessity, to bring out the best in their natures; in some way it stabilizes them, enabling them to put forth qualities that poverty stunts, or even withers away. It struck him that Matthew might be one of those who reform under the influence of fortune, and his voice was kinder, although no less inflexible, as he replied:

"You may be right, in your remark about the effects of circumstance upon

the moral character; as one to whom providence has been kind in that respect, I am hardly in a position to judge of other people's actions. Yet it is generally accepted that youth is a time when circumstances may, to a large extent, be governed by human will. Speaking as one old enough to be your father, I hope you will not resent the inference. Good day to you, Mr. Flood."

III

"Why did you not tell me, my dear, that you had been meeting Matthew Flood?"

Pallas raised her eyes to her father's—sea-blue as her own—and hesitated before replying.

"It is not quite easy to say, Papa; for it was not wholly, as it must appear, a question of deception. You see"—as she paused again, the lovely colour stole up her cheeks; she raised her hands to cover them—"it was as though," she said desperately, "one had found something very beautiful and very breakable, and was afraid to show it, for fear it might be damaged."

"Does Matthew Flood mean all that to you?" He was stricken to the heart.

She let her hands fall to her sides, and clenched them in the silken folds of her gown, before replying.

"All that, and more, Papa."

There was a long silence, which Ralph broke with a heavy sigh.

"Ah, well. I suppose I must speak to Jack Peddy."

"Papa! Oh, dear, dearest Papa!" She had flung herself on her knees with her arms about his waist, and it shocked him deeply to see his proud and beautiful Pallas in such an attitude of humility. "Does that mean that Matthew and I can be betrothed?"

"Pray, my darling, stand up! I can't talk to you down there, Pally! No, no, you must not misunderstand me," he went on, as her glowing face came level with his own. "If Matthew Flood were the only man in the world, I would not willingly let you marry him." He watched the glow die. "What can you see in such a fellow, Pally? I am sure poor Sam is worth a dozen of him."

"I don't doubt your word for a moment, Papa: any more than I can tell you why it is that women are so seldom attracted by mere worth. Is it, do you think, some ineradicable frivolity of our natures? I do try so hard not to be frivolous, but it is so difficult at times." She was smiling, but her eyes were full of tears. He turned his head sharply, to avoid seeing them.

"I would not for the world be deprived of your frivolity, which is one of the joys of my life. But I wish you would tell me why you have set your heart on this fellow, who is not worth the soles of your shoes!"

"I wish I could explain it to myself, Papa." Her essential honesty struggled between the idea of telling him that she had loved Matthew since her childhood, and her conviction of his inability to understand it. "I can see so plainly what you object to, and yet I feel, here"—she placed her hand to her breast, with the sweet, familiar gesture that was one of her many charms—"that he is full of good dispositions, that only need cultivating in order to bring them out."

"I fear that you would find the task of cultivation beyond even your powers, my dear! In any case, I have not the least intention of allowing you to attempt it."

"Are you forbidding us to meet again, Papa?" she asked, paling.

"That I did not do so before is only due to your mother's regard for the son of an old friend, and to my confidence that your good sense would reject further advances from a source of which you must have known I could not approve."

"Oh, Papa, I'm so sorry to have made you think less of my sense! But it is such a very dangerous thing to rely on, in a woman." Her voice trembled between tears and laughter.

"So I perceive. Well, Pally, what are we to do about your undesirable suitor? For I warn you, my dear, nothing on earth will make me consider Matthew Flood for a future son-in-law."

"At least we need not cut him off entirely from our acquaintance," she pleaded. "He has so few friends—he is almost a stranger here in Bristol; think how wretched, to be a stranger in one's own town!"

"That's compromising, Pally! I had thought better of you than that. Neither do I believe it is likely to make you more happy. It is folly to keep reminding oneself of things one may not have—and I fancy young Flood will be of my own opinion, on that subject. I hardly think he is likely to visit the house again, after our conversation this afternoon."

"Oh, Papa, did you quarrel with Matthew?"

"Nothing of the kind; we had a proper and formal conversation, in the course of which I made it perfectly clear that his aspirations, so far as they concerned you, could come to nothing, while I was your guardian."

Again silence fell. At last she said:

"I can only obey your wishes, Papa; but I assure you I shall never marry any one but Matthew."

"Then I shall be in the happy and unusual position, for a father, of keeping my daughter with me for the rest of her life," he said, trying to speak lightly.

"Papa, have you remembered that it is my birthday next month?"

"Come, Pally! This is really too bad. Only the other day it was Christmas, and I nearly beggared myself on those earrings you coaxed out of me!"

"Indeed, it was not of a birthday present I was thinking. Don't you remember? I shall be twenty-one."

As the significance of her words dawned in his brain, Ralph flushed with the anger no one but Pallas could call up in him. It was, perhaps, a penalty of his love for her, that her unreasonableness, as he chose to call it, could, on the few occasions it evinced itself, rouse him to a peak of rage which he fought hard to control.

"Are you warning me that you will take advantage of the fact to defy me?"

"I hope I shall never in my life need to defy you, dearest Papa," was her grave, considered answer; there was the faintest of emphasis upon the word *need*. "But I hope you will soon begin to consider my claim to have a hand in the disposal of my future."

"Claim? What claim do you speak of?" asked Ralph furiously. "Since when has a daughter made 'claims' upon her father?"

"Perhaps I am before my time." She steadied herself against his wrath.

"But I cannot help feeling that there is not so very much difference at present between women and those poor negro slaves, whose owners put collars round their necks and hand them over to the highest bidder! Do not misunderstand me, dear Papa! Do I not know that nothing you have ever done for me has been dictated by any but the most tender regard for my happiness? Yet you will not allow me to be the judge of what makes my happiness. Do you not feel that a woman of twenty-one should know that, better, even than the kindest, most indulgent of fathers?"

"You wound me terribly," he muttered. "When have I ever tried, as you say, to put a collar round your neck, and hand you over—your description appals me—to the highest bidder?"

"Wasn't it a little like that, over Sam Peddy? I don't know whether Mr. Peddy bid higher on his son's behalf than some of my other suitors."

"For God's sake, Pallas!"

"And I know you better"—she laid her hand on his arm to soothe him—"than ever to believe you would dispose of me—no, not for a wilderness of monkeys!—to one whom you did not think would take care of me as tenderly as you have always done. Poor Sam! He would be the most indulgent, if not the most entertaining of husbands; and it is quite time I got married—and you would have a son-in-law to carry on the business when you want to retire! You see, dear Papa, the situation was not wholly free from bargaining."

"Who ever said it was? Every marriage, at least in our class of life; is a bargain."

"Yes; but the bargaining should be between the couples themselves. It should be: 'If you will promise always to love me tenderly, I shall be true to you all the hours we are together.' And, 'If you will tell me all your troubles, I promise you I shall tell you mine.' And, 'If I need advice I will come to you, and if any knowledge of mine is of use to you, it is ever at your service.' Isn't that the ideal bargaining, Papa? It is the only kind that my heart would acknowledge—against all the lawyers' agreements in the world!"

"I see you must go your own way," said Ralph heavily, and went towards the door. With his hand upon the knob, he turned to say, with an expression of ferocity that almost made Pallas quail, "but if ever you——!"

"No, no, Papa! For God's sake don't threaten me. Indeed, indeed it is not necessary." She ran to him, to take his hand imploringly. "Don't you see, dear Papa, I am not proposing to go against your wishes, or in any way to act in a fashion that would bring sorrow to Mama or you. I only ask you to give us both—and Matthew in particular—a chance of proving our sincerity to you; our true desire to be in all ways all you could wish from your children."

"Are you speaking for him, as well as yourself? You are bolder, miss, than I had believed!"

"Only let us meet occasionally; I promise you never to be alone with him—Mama shall be present every and all the time! I will not even trust to Orabella, if you prefer it that way; unless Mama is there I shall tell Matthew I cannot receive him. Then you can be quite sure that your wishes are perfectly respected."

She was alone. She fought hard, biting her lips, to conquer her tears.

IV

It was the night of the Thursday menuet, and lanthorns twinkled all over the greens, as men and maidservants escorted their young ladies, very much disguised in shawls and pattens, home from the Merchants' Hall, where already much ardour was displayed in practising the cotillon for the Grand Ball with which—it having become almost *de rigueur* to link up all such events with some patriotic motive—it had been decided to celebrate the recent victory of Colonel Eyre Coote over Lally at Wandewash. It is doubtful whether the brightest of the Misses More's pupils had heard of the gallant Colonel before, and it is said on creditable authority that little Sophy Piers, being presented with the globes by the formidable Miss Mary, and commanded to find the Carnatic, gave a piercing shriek and passed out in a swoon. All this made no difference whatever to the enthusiasm with which the project of the Ball was received, and even those censorious persons who were inclined to look askance on war-time frivolities were placated by reminders of the valour and gallantry of our troops in the East, who certainly deserved a little celebration.

The one shadow upon the bright prospect, from the point of view of the young ladies, was the shocking shortage of male partners, and several mammas complained that, from being obliged so often to dance "gentlemen," their daughters were acquiring quite a rollicking and masculine carriage, fatal to their prospects in the matrimonial field. To one or two of the more strapping young women this affectation of masculinity was almost becoming, and won them a fluttering adoration from their softer, fluffier companions who, poor dears, were sadly at a loss to find outlet for their romantic sentiments. But no matter how dashing might be these amazons' impersonations of the manly rôle, there was invariably much rivalry and heartburning over the few young men who, from one cause or another, were still eligible as dancing partners.

Pallas had not been to the menuet; pleading a headache, she had stayed home, helping Lydia to rearrange her storeroom and revise the entries in the large, important volume in which housewives of those days recorded the contents of their shelves and cupboards. It was a task that irked Lydia, and one that Pallas usually enjoyed; but Christmas, with all its lavish preparation and rich surplus that made festivity for the many pensioners of the household, was over, and stocktaking could no longer be postponed.

Pallas had not enjoyed Christmas. There had been the usual parties, the family had been enlarged by a lively bunch of cousins from Gloucester, there was tremendous hurly-burly and coming and going of young people; the mistletoe had fulfilled its usual office (and been shamelessly taken advantage of by Orabella, who excused herself by saying that mere hospitality called for some sacrifice of personal inclination, since Pallas was so mean and neglectful of her share in responsibilities); the great swags of evergreens swung their garlands over the revellers' heads, and Ralph's good wines had warmed the hearts and spirits of the many who came to bring their gifts and their greetings to the popular Burmesters. Yet Pallas was glad when Twelfth Night came, and the house resumed its normal aspect of sobriety, with the dried-up garlands crackling in the hearths, and the tinsel and ribbons laid away until another

year. It had been difficult to fulfil the traditions of lightheartedness and frivolity which the season demanded, with the one person whose presence meant the presence of joy so near and yet so far away.

Ralph had been adamant when Lydia hinted to him, in private, that it would be no more than neighbourly to invite Matthew to take a glass of wine on Christmas morning. She even went so far as to charge herself with the responsibility of keeping Pallas out of the way until he was out of the house; but Ralph refused to countenance this form of compromise with the embargo he had laid upon communications between his own household and the one on Brandon Hill.

"You know, dear Ralph, it is almost inevitable that Pallas will see more of him, if Matthew continues to live in Bristol. He is bound to be asked into society, as times goes on."

"That, my dear, is a totally different matter from making him welcome under our own roof. Pray let it be understood from now that I do not encourage any advances between our family and his," said Ralph.

Keeping her own counsel about the passionate discussions at which she herself had been present, on the vexed point of how far it was prudent to "encourage" a young man whose fortunes hung so patently upon a thread, which was the chief topic among Bristol matrons with daughters to be married—Lydia submitted for the time being, but withdrew sufficiently from her mild aloofness as to be very kind to Pallas during those gay weeks when the girl's smile stiffened on her lips and her eyes held too often an expression of puzzlement and pain. It was only when, looking across her daughter's shoulder, she saw on the neatly written page a large, pale blot disfiguring the figured column that she broke the seal of her habitual loyalty to her husband.

"Pally, dear, how beautifully you write! But that is quite enough for this afternoon. We can begin on the conserves to-morrow morning."

"If you don't mind, Mama, I would far sooner finish them now." Pallas kept her head low-bent over her work.

"Pally, I can't and won't have your heart broken in this ridiculous fashion!" burst out Lydia impetuously. "I shall speak to your father this evening."

"Do you think it would be any use, Mama? Indeed, I do not wish to be tiresome, or to make things awkward for you with Papa." Pallas's lips shook: she bit them to stop their trembling.

"Perhaps, in some ways," said Lydia slowly, "I am not a very good mother. I find it so difficult to remember all the things I ought to do and say with you and Orry! But I can at least speak out when I feel sure that things are not going the right way. I know you well enough to believe that your sentiments towards Matthew are not to be changed by anything your father or I may think it is necessary to do for your good; and I think, Pally—and hope to make your father agree with me—that it is wiser to allow you some opportunities for testing the depth and strength of your attachment to a person of whom, after all, you know very little indeed." She was thinking, Ralph ought to realize how sensible she is, how much wiser and more penetrating than most girls of her age.

"Mama! Do you think——?" She reined back her delight. "I should be so well content if I could only meet him now and again—in other people's houses, if not in our own. But I hardly know how that could be arranged,

since I should not care to take any of the people we know into my confidence," said Pallas honestly.

"I don't think that would please your Papa at all," said Lydia. "You must leave me to find a way, and I trust to your own good taste, Pally, not to betray my efforts on your behalf, if they should happen to meet with Papa's approval."

It was so rarely that she set her own against her husband's opinion that Lydia was sure she would obtain a fair hearing, and, true to the traditions of her sex, she was already planning how she would wear her most irresistible gown, and heighten all those charms to which, after twenty-two years of matrimony, Ralph was still as susceptible as a youth of eighteen, when the door burst open and Orabella flew in, her cheeks fresh and glowing from the night air, her eyes sparkling as though the frost were in them, and her lips as usual ripe with the latest gossip.

"Oh lud, oh la! Of all the sensations!" At the unexpected sight of her mother she checked, drawn up on her toes like a startled fairy.

"Well, what now?" asked Lydia, resigning herself as usual to her younger daughter's transports.

"Oh, Mama! Well, it *was* a sensation," pouted Orabella, "and half the girls have forgotten their mittens and that silly thing Aminta Sparling got half-way down Corn Street in her slippers, before she remembered it was her new pair, and pale pink at that, and all ruined by the mud! Oh, Pally, you oughtn't to have had a headache!

"I had Joe Gosselin for my partner—yes, I *did* get him, right under Clara's nose, and I think she could have poisoned me!—and I must say he does dance divinely, though he did nothing but talk about my unparagoned sister—and if the gentlemen were devastated by your absence, Pally, I can tell you who was not: for Celia Montagu danced twice with Sam Peddy and you know as a rule he'll not so much as glance at her—and we'd just arrived at the Looking Glass, when, chancing to look up at the gallery, I all but swooned away! 'Pon my soul I did—and Joe had to catch me, and everybody lost the step—and Mr. Gallup was positively transfixed with rage! But there was hardly any proper dancing for the rest of the evening and the girls were quite demoralized, because of course they're talking of nobody else at all—and how long does mourning last, Mama, for a grandfather?"

"Orry, Orry! Pray take your breath and tell us properly what happened."

"It was *Matthew*, Mama! He towered up in the gallery and his head nearly touched the ceiling and his shadow went up and up—'twas for all the world like a spectre, he, and his shadow and his black, black clothes! He stood for at least five minutes, leaning on the balcony rail and looking for—well, *you* know who he was looking for. And when he didn't find—well, the person he was seeking, his face grew blacker and blacker and he went away, slamming the door so hard behind him that the chandeliers tinkled for at least a quarter of an hour afterwards!"

"That will do, Orry," said Lydia, with one of her rare assumptions of parental authority. "And after supper, you and Pally will please find something to occupy yourselves, for I wish to speak to your Papa, and do not want to be disturbed."

It was a conversation that lasted long into the night; that rose and fell

after the candles had been extinguished and the woven curtains that secured the privacy of the marital couch had been drawn to exclude the winter draughts that circulated in the high vaulted chamber. It was unlike Lydia to be so persistent, Ralph thought vexedly; he had so long had cause to be thankful for her gentle lethargy that he was taken aback by an opposition he had had no practice in meeting.

"Even if Matthew is all that you say of him, is it not better that Pallas should find this out for herself? I assure you she is no fool, but she is less likely to accept what comes to her by hearsay than the evidences of her own senses."

"Does any fellow, however much of a rogue, choose to incriminate himself in his mistress's presence?" asked Ralph scornfully. "You may give our young master Flood credit for sufficient intelligence to present only those aspects of his character which are most likely to please, in the company of yourself and the girls!"

"You admit that there are pleasing aspects," countered Lydia. "Then is it not at least within the bounds of possibility that these are more than surface ornaments, and that Matthew may have qualities that only need good companionship to encourage their growth? After all, he is a Flood. That surely means much, if one believes in inheritance."

"He is also a Merlyn," pointed out Ralph, "and, so far as Matthew is concerned, that means more. A Merlyn was jailed for embezzlement in George First's reign, and Merlyns are notoriously a light-moralled, undependable lot. Matthew's record in London seems to point more clearly to his Merlyn than to his Flood derivations."

"As a Flood," insisted Lydia, "he must have inherited certain strong inclinations—towards luxury and extravagance, for example—that were denied him by the unreasonable manner of his upbringing. For it was unreasonable, Ralph, to bring up a child like a pauper, within sight and sound of all the luxury of his grandfather's home. He must have known that Jonathan, and Jason, and James, as children, were denied nothing; and he must have known that nothing but obstinacy and a selfish caprice—yes, Ralph, I do think Hercules' treatment of his grandson was both selfish and capricious—prevented his enjoying the advantages which his father must have enjoyed. It was enough to embitter a boy like Matthew: to make him wild and imprudent in his freedom."

"You are certainly an impassioned advocate, my dear wife! And supposing," muttered Ralph, on the edge of exhaustion with the prolonged argument, "supposing that Matthew Flood should prove to possess the virtues with which your prejudice credits him: supposing that Pallas and he should be betrothed—what then? If the lawsuit goes against him, do you propose to bestow your daughter's hand upon a man who has no honourable means of supporting her?"

"He would have to be helped to those means," said Lydia stoutly. "There is no doubt he has brains, and if he has used them badly in the past, it is because he has had no steadying influence behind him. It is not for a mere woman to know how a young man like Matthew can employ his talents to their full advantage, but I am sure, dear Ralph, if he had the benefit of sound

advice, such as your own, at his disposal, he would do credit to those who believed in him, and helped him to reorganize his manner of living."

It was impossible to resist her. Worn out with his irritation, his anxiety and his desire for peace and happiness in his home, no less than by his deep concern for his daughter's future, Ralph made conditions. They were to meet only at stated intervals, and in the most formal circumstances; there must be no haphazard coming and going between his house and Triton Lodge; Matthew must be shown that his visits depended on his own good conduct, not only in his lady's company, but elsewhere; he might call only on invitation, and there must be no outdoor meetings, or improvised expeditions, to set the tongues of Bristol chattering. Lydia was to be present at every meeting, of which the utmost duration was to be an hour. "It is hardly asking too much, to devote your fullest attention during one hour of the day to the safeguard of your daughter's interests, and I do trust, my dearest Lydia, that you will not allow your fatal absence of mind to make you neglect the trust which I should be able to repose in you, as mother of my children!"

"Indeed it is not, Ralph, and I will faithfully do all you ask. I will even tie a knot in my handkerchief, to remind me not to leave Pally and Matthew alone together—even if cook rushes to tell me the chimney is on fire!"

"I am sure I do not know why I love you so much, my darling," said Ralph, as he drew her to him, "when you are altogether so rattlepated and more worry to me than a whole seminary of daughters!"

CHAPTER XI

I

"If the worst comes to the worst," Matthew was thinking, "I'll get a commission—somehow—and put in for foreign service." Surely, among those so-called friends and boon companions of the riotous past, there must be one or two who, for the sake of sportsmanship, would sponsor his application? Not a few owed him money, for one may be sure those sprigs of the nobility were not slow to take advantage of the eagerness Matthew showed perhaps too plainly to be of their company. He was neither naïve nor optimistic enough to dream of seeing his money again: but that which young Lord Cramb, of the Dragoon Guards, might not be able or willing to repay in cash, he might return in kind.

Matthew was uneasily conscious of his growing debt to Shergill, which he foresaw as a millstone round the neck of his future progress, unless some means could be found of discharging it at a single stroke of good fortune. Though he would never make enough at soldiering to discharge his Bristol debts, he would at least, as an officer holding a commission in His Majesty's forces, be in a position to gamble; and during this period of forced abstinence his gambler's spirit had gathered so much force that he was ready to embark on any venture, however wild, provided he could get others to accept his credentials.

It was in the end Shergill himself who produced a solution of a problem of which it is fair to suppose he was no less aware than Matthew. Although everything pointed to an almost certain victory for the latter in the suit Jason was bringing against him, it was hardly likely a case involving so many and such acrimonious disputations would be concluded in the current year, and, with no present prospects of peace (the supplies voted for 1761 were £19,616,119—an advance of four millions on the last war budget), Shergill was no less anxious than others who shared his interests to straighten out his financial position. It did not escape his astute summary of Matthew's character that the latter, who chafed at the delay in Jason's onset, might jump at an opportunity of relieving the tedium of waiting by rushing off on some hare-brained venture of which the international situation provided no shortage of choice.

It was with a careful appearance of indifference that he made his suggestion.

"Why don't you take a share in the *Cassiopæia*?"

"Are you jesting?" A tightness about the lips betrayed the speaker's opinion of jests along these lines.

"Jesting? Not I. Look'ee here, young Matthew: I'm as sure as one can be of aught under heaven that we'll beat Jason all around the town, but only a fool makes no provision for foul weather, because the sky's clear. I want the *Cassiopæia*, and I've at last talked Jack Peddy into coming in with me. Cruikshank won't touch her; he's done poorly out of the privateers, and he's laying off till he gets over some of his losses."

"What do you want? To run her as a privateer?" Matthew allowed his surprise to be seen in the lift of his black brows. He had heard enough, since his arrival in Bristol, of the losses on privateering to have no enthusiasm for this form of gambling.

"Thank 'ee," said Shergill. "My patriotism having cost me, up to the moment, quite as much as I choose to venture—though in loyalty to the King, God bless him, Tom Shergill's second to none—I'm turning to other matters. So far, the best pickings has been had by them that's kept out of gunshot. Ay, there's a lot of disappointed folk in Bristol to-day, and there's not a few that rues their folly in forsaking the trade they understand for the warfare they don't. I'm not complaining; all the same, I'm not denying I've felt the wind, and I was telling Jack to-day, unless we get our hands on the *Cassiopæia* quick, she'll be snapped up by some of these sucking firms that's taking advantage of the temporary shyness of the old hands to nose into the trade."

"Is that the game now?" Interested, Matthew looked up sharply.

"It's pretty plain, isn't it? Bristol shippers have ruined themselves in the last four years, scrambling for the prizes that's fallen to one or two. '58 was the best year—the year of the *Bellona*, when we took twenty-five prizes and the Society voted Saumarez a hundred guineas for taking the *Belliqueux*—that was the cause of some bad feeling in shipping quarters: especially among the friends o' Richards, that cut the fourteen Frenchmen out of harbour at La Rochelle, under the very noses of seven of the enemy's line o' battle ships! They all took to privateering after that—till there was nothing left to chase!" Shergill shook a laugh out of his ponderous belly.

"So you want to put the *Cassiopæia* back into the trade?" Matthew said, after a pause. Like Shergill, he was careful to show no sign of eagerness, although since the moment of the other's almost incredible suggestion his heart had been ticking against his breast-bone like the wheel of a clock. "She's old, isn't she? At least, I've heard them saying so along the waterfront."

Shergill closed one eye.

"Old enough to get her cheap, and new enough to do good service in the proper hands. Jack's of the same opinion as myself, and though neither him nor me's willing at present to increase our holdings—if a third party's prepared to come in, I'm ready to stake 'em to their share."

"Representing what sum?—and at what rate of interest?" asked Matthew coolly.

"A third share—let's see; 't'd be worth, as near as one could say without reckoning, a matter of between three and four thousand pounds. They're asking eight thousand; in a week or so that'll jump to ten, if there's other offers. But to-morrow I fancy I'd get her for seven—money down, dock quittances and such-like taken over. It don't leave much for the goods and provisions, but that's for the shipmaster to get around."

"You've found a master?" asked Matthew quickly.

"I've had a dozen sniffing on my heels for the last month," grunted Shergill.

"Abiathar Crown among them?"

"What? 'Biathar?" The lawyer again shook out his ponderous chuckle and wagged his head as in depreciation of a pleasantry. "'Biathar used to be

a good master; set him to sail a pint pot across a barrel o' beer: it's about what he's good for, these days."

"I've heard a different opinion."

"Maybe you have. But it don't come from Liverpool."

"Do you listen to Liverpool opinion?" Matthew spoke with the scorn of the Bristol man. During the recent weeks he had been aware, dimly, and with a certain feeling of surprise, of the growth within him of a sentiment concerning his birthplace which he had never expected to feel.

"Depends on the quarter it comes from. Burrow and Haytor hasn't much good to say of Captain Crown!"

"Well—you haven't yet mentioned the interest." Never having heard these names, significant in shipping, Matthew changed the subject.

"Ah! Well, it's bound to be high. I ain't, as you once accused me, out for philanthropy!—and war-time's the underwriters' harvest. 'Tudn't be worth considering at less than forty per cent."

"And the profits; what rating do you put on them?"

"Call it nine thousand a head," said Shergill after a pause, "to be on the safe side! And that 'ud leave you a couple o' thousand clear profit and a clean ledger for the next trip."

"And the account you hold against me already? I take it my share stands security for that?"

"Ay, sir; if that agrees with you."

Matthew bit his thumbnail. This proposition—on the face of it, like the majority of Shergill's dealings, so generous—had grave disadvantages. The forty per cent—a scandalous rate of usury—stuck in his throat, yet he knew it was useless to dispute it. He must accept or reject Shergill's offer as it stood.

Without doubt, war-time conditions much increased the lawyer's risks, and only an insane optimism would dismiss altogether the possibility of the case's going against Matthew. Whether he lost or he won, he was still accountable, not only for Shergill's professional services, but for a sum of money which, when, on Matthew's insistence, the lawyer had presented his statement, brought his client up sharply, with a whistling in his ears.

He had known for some time that the marked amiability shown to him by his grandfather's cronies was aimed at drawing him into their circle: he was to be to them a second Hercules, a link in the chain of mutual advantage which had been forged in the first place to dispose of possible rivalries. Encouraging as this was, in the sense that it indicated their confidence of his victory, it was not at all what Matthew desired for his future. He had a hatred of cabals—in business or in friendship. His was the instinct of the lone wolf, hunting in solitude, with none to dispute his gains.

Only the fact that he dared not, for the present, gamble upon his future inclined him to entertain Shergill's offer, which, made patently for the lawyer's safeguard, rather than for Matthew's convenience, held out small promise of reward on the scale which appealed to the latter's ambition. Vast gains, he knew, came only to those prepared to undertake vast responsibilities, and the ambition he had harboured ever since hearing of the alteration in his grandfather's will was to be sole owner of slaving ships, and to make at a stroke that mythical fortune which conditioned all his dreams of the future. To live like a prince, to hang diamonds between the fair breasts of Pallas, and pearls the

size of pears in her ears—these were dreams another man might have indulged fitfully, conscious and half-ashamed of their fantasy, but which had grown to be the very warp and woof of Matthew's existence.

Nor had he actually the patience or the temperament to come slowly to his kingdom. From the moment he learned that he might be heir to a prodigious fortune, the bonfires of ambition were lighted in his brain. It was not enough, for Matthew, that he should become, at a mere stroke of a pen, an enormously wealthy man, he must double, must triple his fortune. He was, indeed, almost sick with impatience during these days of waiting, when, to pass the leaden hours, he covered sheets of paper with great conglomerations of figures, with calculations and endless columns of compound addition and multiplication. He was already, in his mind, a great captain of commerce and finance, and it can therefore be understood that the offer which Shergill put before him was, in his state of reeling and dislocated standards, as ignominious as though a gambler in millions were offered a shilling share in a lottery. At the same time, he could not remain insensible to the excitement which mounted in his blood at the prospect of engagement, on however trivial a scale, in a form of commerce which, since his return to Bristol, had established its hold ever more and more strongly upon his imagination.

As a condition of going in with Shergill and Peddy—for they must expect conditions; the grandson of Hercules Flood was not to be treated as a charity-boy, however awkward the present state of his finances!—he would at any rate insist upon Abiathar as shipmaster.

This resolution was not all a matter of sentiment. Apart from the fact that their acquaintance had ripened during the past weeks, Matthew was satisfied that in Abiathar's hands his own interests would be well guarded. He was far too suspicious and too shrewd by nature not to have gone thoroughly into Abiathar's credentials, without the latter's knowledge, and the bulk of opinion, among those whom he questioned, inclined to the conclusion that, although undoubtedly Abiathar had not done well for his Liverpool owners, the fault lay, as he claimed, with them, and was not due to any lack either of seamanship or of commercial ability on the part of the shipmaster.

Abiathar, become almost *persona grata* at Triton Lodge, had helped to introduce Matthew to the vast resources of his grandfather's nautical library, a hobby of the old man's latter years. It meant more to Matthew than it did to Abiathar, whose poor scholarship preferred to deal with material fact, rather than literary fancy, for which, nevertheless, as well as for those who could understand it, he had a polite respect. Abiathar furthermore instructed Matthew in the arts of chart-reading, dead reckoning, and the use of the sextant, in all of which his pupil took an amateur's interest: and beguiled the heavy hours by the recital of experiences that fed Matthew's growing appetite for all that concerned the Guinea voyage.

He resolved, therefore, to consult Abiathar, and to get the benefit of his advice, before returning a definite answer to Shergill's proposition, which had begun to amuse him by its impudent assumption that he would snatch at any means of clearing his debts—even a forty per cent interest on the original sum advanced! If this was how Hercules and his friends had treated each other, no wonder they found it better, for self-protection, to form a cabal.

II

Bristol mammas, scorning Bristol papas, and flinging caution to the winds, snowed cards of invitation upon Triton Lodge. After all, hadn't Lyddie Burmester shown them the way? She was not running the risk of having this golden fish slip through her fingers: and if the fish should prove, in the long run, no more than common herring, nothing would be easier than to drop it back in the pond! At least Lucilla, Clarissa, Joanna and Isobel should have equal chances with those two vain Burmester girls of becoming the future mistress of Triton.

So Bristol dressmakers were driven to distraction, and young Bristol ladies posed and languished and giggled and coloured their fresh young faces in imitation of what they supposed was London style: and there was a terrible run on ointment at Laidlaw's the chemists, because West Country complexions did not take kindly to white lead. At one of the menuets Charlotte Bellamy caused a positive hurricane of giggles by appearing in no less than fourteen patches, each one of which, she assured her intimates, was cover for a pimple. But even the most satirical were sorry afterwards, because within a fortnight poor Charlotte was buried. A shocking affair; but as nobody connected her death with white lead, as many cosmetics were sold as ever, and the healthiness of Bristol constitutions triumphed, apparently, over the violence done to Bristol skins.

So it was inevitable that Matthew and Pallas should meet many more times than the grudging permission of Ralph prescribed, though they had few opportunities for private conversation, which might have consoled him, had he heard of it. There was never a rout or a tea party to which the Miss Burmesters were not invited—not always to the pleasure of mammas with daughters of the same age to be disposed of; but the young people themselves insisted that a party was hardly a party unless Pally and Orry were there. Miss Clara Peddy was once heard despairingly to declare that, although Pally undoubtedly stole all one's admirers, no assembly from which she was absent was truly elegant.

Hemmed in by billows and flounces, stifled by the strong, exotic perfumes which the young ladies of Bristol favoured because their beaux brought them from abroad—their choice determined rather by the powerfulness of the odour than by regard for the wearer's personality, which was often much belied; for timid little Leta Baring, for example, could hardly be accused of drenching herself deliberately in an essence dedicated by antiquity to cyprians of the Far Orient—Matthew would see Pallas's eyes laughing at him across the room, and his heart would tighten; for he could not but see that which must have been obvious to any person of discernment—that when she looked away, Pallas became merely beautiful; but that the moment her eyes met his she was luminous: a veritable stream of light seemed to pour from her into the very veins of his body.

"Oh, my beautiful love. I will make you so happy. There is nothing I will not do for you, my beautiful love!" he felt his heart respond.

Yet, when they found themselves alone for a moment, she behaved with an exquisite discretion. It should not be her fault, her manner warned him,

if Bristol started its tricks of gossip. Their greatest safeguard was that Bristol had always gossiped about Pallas Burmester; it was taken for granted—and good-humouredly tolerated among those of her own sex who loved her—that any newcomer had to get over his passion for Pally Burmester before he was free to pay attention to any other of the pretty mantraps that were set for him. In fact, most of her contemporaries had resigned themselves to accepting Pally's cast-offs with a good grace; but no such prize had ever offered itself as the heir—none of the young fry doubted it—to the Flood fortune, and at Matthew's entrance the air became vibrant with competition, faintly acrimonious, and even Pallas ran, for the first time, the gauntlet of feminine suspicion.

As music was the elegant entertainment of the day, Matthew, who had not a great taste for feminine interpretations, contrived on many occasions to have words with his love under cover of some artless performance on spinet or harp. It caused no comment, then, when they were seen whispering in each other's ears: because fully one half of the company was occupied in the same way, and a request for "a little music" was generally interpreted as a means whereby some delicate indiscretions could be perpetrated, without arousing the criticism attendant upon a more flagrant affront to the conventions—which were much more strictly observed in the provinces than in London.

She sat on a window-seat, with Orabella, perched on its farther extremity, carrying on a hectic double-barrelled flirtation with the youngest Cruikshank boy (hardly out of the classroom, and all spots and flushes) and one of the Casamajor cousins, a heavy, pleasant youth, much hampered by his serious consideration of whether it would be a good thing to propose to Orry and get it over; he was determined to marry her in the end. Miss Totty Shergill, who was too old for such assemblies as the present, but who always sulked if she was not invited, was assaulting the welkin with her shrill soprano rendering of "Where the bee sucks, there lurk I"—which she emphasized by really terrifying leers at poor young Sinclair, who accompanied her. "On a bat's back I-I do-oo fly-y-y-y-y-y-y-y," yodelled Miss Totty. . . .

"I have a present for you," said Matthew, under cover of these vocal acrobatics. He had so placed himself as to cut her off from the flirtatious trio on the other end of the window-seat; she was between him and the curtain and panelling, she was his, all of her—her lovely upturned face, vivid as a rose, her parted lips, her vertiginous, sea-green eyes and the soft white spread of her shoulders and bosom. "At least, it will be mine, I hope, to give you some day. I found it in the house—I suppose it belonged to my grandmother; a box of pearls. A handful perfect; the rest, bubbles of various shapes and sizes, only good enough to embroider you a pair of slippers, or to sew along the hem of your gown. We'll have the best of them pierced, and you shall have a necklace every woman will envy you."

"Why should you think I want to rouse envy?" She smiled up at him, and it was as though she gathered him into her heart. "You know, it's an extraordinarily lucky thing: but I've never known envy. But people tell me it's most terribly uncomfortable, and makes one quite miserable when one suffers from it."

"It is an agony most of your sex take pleasure in inflicting upon each other!" he rallied her. "And, however tender may be your intentions, my

dear love, I fear there will be many occasions on which you will arouse it; for I can't permit your solicitude for the feelings of your rivals to thwart me of the joys to which I look forward—of decking the beauty of my bride in all that beauty exacts as its just due!”

“You know, there are times when I almost hope——”

“You hope——?” he prompted her, bending down to catch her words as Miss Totty's C in alt clove the air.

“That you won't win the case,” she faltered.

“What? You'd sooner marry a beggar?”

“It is a foolish thing to say, isn't it, when one has never known poverty? Yet——”

“My pretty Pallas, I can satisfy your curiosity, at any moment you are disposed to listen to a sordid history,” he said dryly. “How does poverty strike you?—as a pretty Trianon scene, rose-wreathed cottage, a dappled milkmaid carrying her pails through the morning dew? I promise you there's nothing romantic in the reality; on the contrary,” he continued with passion, “it's a foul, mephitic condition that strangles all the good there may be in a man. The mere suggestion of being tumbled back into poverty”—he stopped and passed his hand roughly across his face; it had blanched to the colour of old wax. These days of doubt and waiting were tearing him. “If I were poor, I should make you a wretched husband, Pallas; so, as you value our future, put in your prayers that Jason may be confounded, and that we may come to mutual enjoyment of all that grandfather intended for me. As a mere matter of sentiment, it would be a shame if the old man's last wishes miscarried!”

She failed to smile at the sally.

“It frightens me that our future should depend on your grandfather's fortune. It frightens me sometimes, dear Matthew, that you should place such high value on money; after all, it means so little beside——”

“Beside what?”

“Beside all we might be to each other. If you load me with jewels and make me always a lay figure for your magnificence, I shall soon feel it isn't the woman in me you love, but some curious piece of machinery that is part of your pride. I shall become afraid to appear before you unless I'm decked out in accordance with your fancy: and little by little the living part of me will shrink and shrivel until there's nothing left but the framework of wire or plaster that supports your grandeurs!”

“And otherwise—if we were poor?”

“I should truly feel myself a part of your life; I should feel I was always necessary to your happiness, as you are to mine—oh, my dear love, you see I am very selfish! I want to be always in the very forefront of your thoughts, as you are in mine.”

“That I swear you shall ever be,” said Matthew earnestly. “I have never, before I met you, Pallas, known a woman who commanded all of my thoughts, no less than my passions; nor, to speak frankly, have I ever desired to meet such a one. Before your coming, Pally, women, to me, were what they are to the majority of men: toys, pastimes, a necessary adjunct to a man's health of mind and body. I never met a woman who impressed me with her claim to be regarded as a creature of responsibility, or with whom I could willingly

contemplate a lifetime of companionship. In the moment I saw you, all that was changed. Whatever ill you may hear of me, will you believe that I am truly and wholly yours: that I have no desire left, save the desire to serve you——"

"In your way, or in mine?" Her smile was angelic.

"Can there be two ways? All that is mine is yours; can you not say the same?"

"All that, and more: for if our ways were different, I would surrender mine to do you service."

"I wish to God the case were over, and the matter settled for good or ill. We shall at least not be beggars, Pally!—for I have plans I can't discover to you yet, that would keep us in some fashion, if—damnation on that 'if'! And blessings on that squalling woman," he added more good-humouredly. "I little thought to see the day when I should bless Miss Totty Shergill! She's starting another song—Pallas, when do we meet again?"

"Don't you take tea with Mama on Friday?" asked Pallas primly.

Miss Totty unfortunately broke down at this moment, with a fit of coughing; she had literally sung herself out—for which the more musical members of the audience were grateful—and was led, choking and gasping, from the room. There was an instant surging of petticoats around Matthew; bright eyes, ostensibly dedicated to flirtation, had remarked he was paying altogether too much attention to Pally Burmester—cunning witch!—half-hid behind the window curtain, a situation which was noted as advantageous for tender moments.

"Pray, Mr. Flood, when are you going to invite us to view your property?" impudently demanded Miss Peddy, shaking her flaxen curls at the lion of the hour. "Ever since I was a little chit, I have longed to see inside those imposing gates, and, I warn you, the ladies of Bristol will take it monstrous ill if you don't soon satisfy their curiosity!"

Even Orabella gasped at this frank impertinence: for, of course, Triton Lodge did not belong to Matthew yet, although it was going to, and what a lovely hostess Pally would make——! She cast a sidelong glance at her sister, to see how Pallas took this assumption of privileges. Pallas looked calm, though a little flushed by Clara's impudence.

"Matthew was thinking rapidly. He had racked his brains for some means of getting Pallas into the mansion over which she was presently to reign, and had failed to devise any. He longed to display to her the beauty and dignity of the home of his ancestors—and this saucy Bristol girl had suggested an expedient. It remained to be seen if he could secure the support which alone would enable him to put it into practice.

III

Bristol society split itself into equal and opponent halves over the invitation. The elder and soberer half declared that, apart from its being a deliberate affront to the Jason Floods, it was an unheard-of breach of good taste for young Flood to give a party in a house to which he had not yet established his title. The younger, more light-headed faction said it was a tactful and

elegant way of returning hospitalities, and, anyway, it might be their only opportunity of seeing the interior of Triton Lodge; since, if Jason came into the money after all, he would certainly do nothing in the way of entertainment. And with Mrs. John Peddy acting as hostess!—if that wasn't enough to silence criticism, what was?

Lydia Burmester had refused the office, it was pointed out by the conventionalists. It would surely have been more reasonable for her to have accepted, since she was young Matthew's oldest Bristol acquaintance, had not her sense of the appropriate taken precedence of friendship's claims. Nothing of the sort, retorted the feather-heads; Lyddie Burmester had been forbidden by her husband, who, as all Bristol knew by now, did not favour young Mr. Flood. So there were about equal proportions of acceptances and refusals to Matthew's cards of invitation, most of the refusals giving as their reason that it was the day of Lady Gannet's indoor fête on behalf of the Pennsylvanian Movement for the Abolition of Slavery, to which they had promised to go. This suited Matthew admirably, he having, with Mrs. Peddy's help (she was a fat, red-faced, rollicking woman, who, in addition to being willing to go to any lengths to capture Matthew for her Clara, had a robust sense of humour) selected this date with a view to excluding sundry tedious individuals he was obliged to invite. He had been bitterly galled by Lydia's refusal to act as his hostess; but, besides having doubts of the tastefulness of the scheme, she had not dared to arouse Ralph's ire by assuming the rôle Matthew, with some confidence, had assigned to her.

"You will at least be present? You must know I have arranged this only for Pallas; I could think of no other way of showing her her future home," he pleaded.

"Oh, Matthew, you alarm me when you speak with such confidence! My dear, dear boy, supposing that luck goes against you?"

"Then it will not be Triton Lodge, but a pretty little house somewhere in the country," he said, conquering her resistance with his high spirits. "And Pallas will never have seen what should be hers! You have been an angel to us." He captured her cold, soft hand. "No one could have understood as you have done the depth and sincerity of my intentions. Can't you understand a little more? I appear to Pallas as—what? As an adventurer, out of nowhere. I should like her for once—if no more—to see me against the background I belong to. God knows, I am not humble," he stammered, "but there are times I feel—before her—like the most miserable of beggars—"

The maternal instinct in Lydia, that hardly ever stirred in association with her daughters, returned the pressure of his hand.

"We are all beggars before Pallas," she told him, with an infinite gentleness. "I have felt like that myself—which I'm sure is very odd, considering she is my daughter! But Pally has some inner wealth . . . I cannot explain to you what it is; but I assure you, dear Matthew, it has nothing to do with her own background, or with the backgrounds against which she sees her friends. She will not love you better—as Orry might do—for seeing you as the master of Triton Lodge. Indeed, I think she might be pained, as I am, a little, to think of the affront you offer to your relations."

"I owe them nothing," said Matthew roughly.

"Supposing you win, Matthew," said Lydia suddenly. "Are you going to

show any magnanimity to your aunt, to your cousins, who, poor creatures, must have grown up in tranquil expectation of the inheritance you have taken from them?"

"Dear ma'am," said Matthew, smiling because he never could resist Lydia. "Of what use would grandfather's fortune be to my poor wretched cousins? They would never be given a farthing to spend on themselves, and all the use my aunt would find for it would be to pour it into the sink of some religious society. Still—whatever my faults may be, and I'll allow they're legion—I am not ungenerous, and I should never be likely to allow my cousins to come to want—in the event of their father not providing properly for them."

"I wish Ralph knew you better," said Lydia impulsively.

"Perhaps he will, later on; but, I admit, I don't find it easy to talk to other people in the way I talk with you. You'll come to my rout?" pressed Matthew.

"I shall have to ask Ralph. . . ."

He wondered what means of persuasion she had employed, when he read the note in her fine, feminine hand, that was brought by one of the Burmester servants and presented to him by Africa. He had not seen Pallas for more than a week: his heart throbbed at the thought of receiving her under the many-branched chandeliers of Triton Lodge.

"Are you wearing the blue ribbons, or the grey?" demanded Orabella, popping her head into the bedroom where her sister was supposed to be tiring herself for the momentous event. Miss Orabella, as usual, was taking advantage of the wider spread of mirror in her mother's room to array her charms to the advantage she considered they merited. "Do put on the grey, because my heart's set on the cherry, and if you wear your sky-blue, we'll look like a patriotic procession. Pally!" she broke off to cry. "You've not even started! For mercy's sake, what's come over you? The coach'll be at the door in five minutes, and even Mama's got as far as her overgown, with me and Betty to assist her."

"I had forgotten," said Pallas hollowly.

"Forgotten what? For the love of heaven, don't stand there, looking so lilywhite and stricken, or I shall swoon away with sheer anxiety, before I've got time to hear what it's all about."

"It's Lady Gannet's indoor fête——"

"You knew that before!" accused Orabella; "and I spent a whole morning arguing with you that, with Amelia and Michal Flood to help her—and half a hundred beside who're flattered to take part in the old Gannet's charities—there was no need for you to put yourself out about not being there. And in the end you agreed with me, Pally—you agreed! So it's just going back on your word—besides letting Mama down, after all the hours she spent in persuading Papa. Yes, she did! They had a real *quarrel* about it: you needn't shake your head, because I heard part of it. And Mama only won by saying we were Matthew's oldest friends, and it would look terrible bad if we didn't support him on so public an occasion, and all the town would talk. Oh, Pally, for goodness' sake change your gown and put a little red on your cheeks. It may be elegant to be pale, but you look like a ghost, Pally—you do, on my soul, and no gentleman can be expected to be in love with a ghost!"

"I have to go to Lady Gannet's," repeated Pallas desperately. "Don't you remember, Orry? Heaven knows what drove it out of my head: but I promised her I would recite the piece out of *Oroonoko* at the end of the speechmaking——"

"Nobody cares about *Oroonoko*," declared Orabella, with sisterly frankness, "and who on earth cares above movements in Pennsylvania? Indeed, there wouldn't be a soul there, if Bristol people weren't such snobs, and anxious to keep in with Lady Gannet, because of her title. I'm surprised at you for pandering to them—and I shall go and tell Mama! If she isn't thoroughly angry it's nothing but downright preference; I'd surely have been whipped and sent to bed." Orabella, who had never in her life been either, flounced out of the room. Pallas sat on at her mirror, her hands clasped hopelessly in her lap.

That infernal conscience. She had been fighting it since noon—at which hour she had remembered her promise to Lady Gannet. Lydia had remarked on her silence at the midday meal, and had threatened the inevitable dose. Pallas was losing her strength over this unsatisfactory love affair; she must try the Clifton waters, or a course of Doctor Fordyce's iron pills. If only Ralph would give way! He should have understood this trait in his daughter, so plainly inherited from himself; had he not waited seven years, while Miss Lyddie Casamajor slowly got over her preference for another man? Had the cases been reversed, Ralph, she knew, would not have got over it—would have gone a bachelor to his grave.

But Ralph was furious about the party at Triton; was in no mood to exercise his sympathies. He had given way, at last, to Lydia's tears, so rarely evoked: to her plea that it was "hardly a party," hardly, even, a formal occasion. The younger set in Bristol was to be shown a house it had never entered before, a house, she insisted, of the greatest local and historical interest. There would be some refreshment, but no sort of pomp or entertainment. . . . Ralph gave up. He was beginning to feel defeated by his women.

Lydia came to her daughter like a full-sailed galleon, with lips and eyes indignant.

"Pallas, what is the meaning of this?"

"I can't break my word to Lady Gannet, Mama."

"Fiddlesticks! Now, pray, get on your gown, and let there be an end to this nonsense."

Pallas sat with her hands in her lap, and looked speechlessly at her mother.

"Pally, do you want to make me angry?" stammered Lydia, so near tears herself that she could think of no arguments.

"You know I never wish to do that, Mama. But what's the use of making promises if you don't keep them?"

"It was a ridiculous promise," fumed Lydia, "and I'm not at all sure I approve of your giving theatrical displays, even for charity. I don't object to it in the drawing-room, but on an occasion like this, when all sorts of people are present——"

"It's such a little thing to do. Mama! And you know Mr. Southerne's verses are very refined—a great deal more refined, I'm sure, than the original from which they were taken!" The irrepressible smile glimmered; there was

no need to tell Lydia that her daughters were privately addicted to the writings of Mrs. Aphra Behn.

"The whole thing's most uncalled for, and why people should be expected to support American charities, with all the sick and poor we've got in Bristol——"

"Opposition to the slave trade isn't confined to America," said Pallas, with that quiet stubbornness her parents knew, and dreaded. "They are more organized than we are, and it behoves us to give them all the help we can: but sooner or later, Mama, we are bound to combine on our own account. You know that's what we're struggling towards: a society, a united body to which the Government will have to pay attention."

"Oh dear, Pally." Lydia collapsed into a chair. "It does upset me to hear you talk like this!—so odd, so unwomanly! What has a woman to do with Governments, which, very properly, are in the hands of the male sex, and ever will remain so?"

"Don't be so sure, Mama." She had for the moment almost the look of a young seeress; her lips compressed, her eyes wide and pale with inner light. To what strange being, thought poor Lydia, have I given birth? Then she pulled herself together; the idea of indulging in such foolishness of conversation, and she in her new carriage gown, with the ruffles of taffetas, with which to arouse the admiring envy of Mrs. John Peddy. "Come, Pally; be a good girl, and smarten yourself up! That gown will do very well, but——"

"Mama!" She was twisting her fingers in desperation. "*I can't*. Heaven knows, I do little enough to help our cause—in comparison, for instance, with Amelia Flood, who devotes the whole of her time to it."

"It is quite the best thing she can do with her time! Please don't start comparing yourself with Amelia Flood, or I shall lose my temper. When a girl is as plain as that, and has no attraction for the other sex, it is very sensible of her to occupy herself with good works; but, I warn you it's not at all what a husband like Matthew expects from his wife, and I personally consider that he will be quite justified in ordering you to give up all this nonsense after you are married."

"Darling Mama!" The sudden radiance made Lydia catch her breath. "It is so lovely to hear you say 'after you are married'! I say it often to myself, but aloud I never quite dare."

"Oh, Pally, there's so much road to travel before then. Your father is no fonder of Matthew than he formerly was, and I think it was most unkind of you to involve me in that long and painful argument with him and then to change your mind."

"I give you my word the fête had gone right out of my head—at least, my own share in it. It's not so very odd after all, Mama dear," she pleaded. "I only saw Lady Gannet for a minute, when her coach was held up in Broad Street and she called me to the window: and before she had finished speaking to me the traffic was moving on."

"In that case she has probably completely forgotten she ever asked you, and it is all a fuss about nothing!"

Pallas shook her head.

"You forget, I won her prize at school for declamation!—and you know whenever I go to the Park how I'm teased to recite for the company's amuse-

ment. I cannot bear to displease you, dearest Mama, but I must not break my word."

Lydia rose, her face cold and displeased.

"Well, I suppose you have a message for Matthew?"

"Tell him exactly what has happened. I'm sure he will understand." The words were braver than the tone in which they were spoken.

"You expect a great deal of your lover, Pally. I warn you, I shall not be surprised if this occasions a serious quarrel between you," was Lydia's parting shot, softened by a sigh. It was not the first time she had been defeated by her daughter's principles, but she was genuinely shocked and puzzled that Pallas should be impervious to the precepts of her times: that the claims of a lover or a husband come before all others, and that it was not "womanly" to ignore them.

The tears she had so far managed to restrain splashed down Pallas's cheeks, as she slid a foot out of its house slipper and groped with her toes for an outdoor pair. She heard the crunch of the coach, setting out for Triton. . .

IV

"My dear Matthew, I am sorry for your annoyance and I think you are entitled to it, for I do not at all agree with Pally's conduct. But you can comfort yourself with this, if you please: that if she insists upon keeping her word to others, she will not break it to you. And that is not a bad thing to be able to depend on," said Lydia. She laid her light hand for a moment on Matthew's arm, then rustled away, to spare him the mortification of an audience for his disconcertation. Lydia had not only a tender heart, but more tact than either of her daughters.

Cut to the core, befuddled and furious with Pallas, Matthew made the poorest job of his duties as host. It was for Pallas that doors had been unlocked, chandeliers loaded with their waxen burden, fires kindled on long empty hearths and dust shaken from historic tapestries; for Pallas, whose blithe foot was not among those that passed up and down the stairs. There was great mirth in galleries, exclamations of admiration and astonishment, girlish squeals of nervousness on the dark bends of staircases—Matthew damned them and left them to it.

His second attempt to dispense the hospitality of Triton had gone wrong: there was a curse on it. He was short with Mrs. John Peddy, doing her level best to keep up the standard of gaiety, to chaperone the girls and at the same time to overlook her own servants who had been imported to supplement the curtailed staff at the Lodge, and who skirmished about, at odds with the appointments of a house they had not had time to master.

"Pray, pray don't look so gloomy, dear Matthew!"

It was Orabella at his elbow, hatted and furred to follow her mother to the carriage which had already been cried.

"And listen: I've got something particular to tell you. Do you know it's Pally's birthday on Monday? I thought you'd wish to be prepared with an offering—like all her other admirers!"

"Whose name, of course, is legion. I wonder she finds time to spare for a detrimental like myself."

"La, how thrilling you look when you're angry!" observed Orabella, her head on one side. "You are at least like a sultan, or an eastern bashaw, with those black brows of yours and your dark and flashing eyes!"

"Then take care I don't behave like a sultan, and add you to my harem," said Matthew—only half jesting: for indeed she was a tempting spectacle, with her fur-trimmed pelisse covering the gauze gown, and the cherry-coloured veil looped back over the ribbons of her bonnet. She twinkled at him wickedly.

"Indeed, I shouldn't require much persuasion to inhabit such a harem as this; I've a deal more taste than Pally for luxury," she impudently averred. "Oh, Matthew, 'twould break my heart if Mr. Jason won the case! For what would make a lovelier ballroom than this room and the hall beyond? When you and Pally are married, you must promise me a grand ball, and invite all your friends from London, so I may have something better to choose from than these Bristol lumps, who stand on my toes at dancing class, and are so dreary in conversation—you'd pity me if you knew what I have to listen to!"

"You'd better not count on my assistance; your sister's future and mine seem to be far from settled."

"Now, I won't have you quarrelling with Pally: for though she's the most provoking, tiresome girl, she has the best of natures, and she's ridiculous fond of you!"

"She has strange ways of showing it."

"Pooh! You don't know Pally. She's as stubborn as a mule, and you may have to thrash her out of it—but not too severely! For she's the tenderest-hearted being in the world and would cut off her little finger sooner than betray a living soul. I hope you give her something very pretty for her birthday, for we share all our presents!" concluded Orabella ingenuously.

"Then what do *you* want, dear Orabella, for Pallas's birthday?" He could not reserve his smile.

She set her head on one side, considering. She pointed a toe and surveyed the arch of an instep delicate as a fairy's. She bit the tip of a saffron-coloured glove, and smoothed with reflective hand the border of sable around the collar of her pelisse. And, as none of these manœuvres seemed productive of inspiration, she sighed, lifted her muff to her chin and dropped a curtsy.

"That I must leave to your own invention," said she, with so ludicrous and belated an assumption of maidenly decorum, that the last of his ill-temper vanished and he laughed aloud. "I must go; Mama will be furious with me for dallying so long——"

Africa came across the room, his white teeth glittering in his oiled and beaming face.

"Yo' mammy asking fo' yuh, Missie Or'bella!"

She took a step towards the door; gasped, turned back and clutched Matthew's hand.

"Matthew—Matthew! I know. Give us . . ."

CHAPTER XII

I

"LOT 13," announced the auctioneer—a beery-faced person in a bottle-green coat a size too small for him, that strained across a yellow waistcoat so mottled with traces of former repasts that it resembled a frog's belly. "A fine, young negro! Formerly the property of Cap'n Dartry, that all of you knows—you 'as 'ere, gennelmun, as tempting a proposition as 'as ever fallen to my good fortune to offer in the Bristol market. Stand up, Sambo, an' show the lords an' gennelmun yer characters."

A wretched figure rose from its haunches at the back of the auctioneer's table and stood, with eyes downcast, for the inspection of the company. The small, back room of the Llandoger Trow was filled from wall to wall with a crowd, few of whom had the intention of buying, all of whom had been drawn there by the curiously enticing prospect of seeing human flesh and blood offered for sale. A handful of negroes were billed among some odds and ends of marine tackle that attracted the owners of small rivercraft, and these accounted for the presence in the uncouth assembly of a better-dressed minority, among whom the figure of Matthew Flood stood out, not only on account of its height, but for the expression of contemptuous distaste that accentuated the never very genial lines of his features.

"God, what a stench!" he muttered to Abiathar, propping the wall at his side.

"Eh? Oh, that—that's nigger smell; an' damn' bad nigger smell, or call me a Dutchman," was the grunted rejoinder.

The young negro stood there, shivering like a dog, in cotton breeches stained with sweat and urine, and a threadbare coat, once part of a naval uniform, which hung slack on his shoulders. No one bid for him.

"Come, gennelmun; don't say you don't reckernize a bargain when you sees one. A fine, young negro, rising eighteen year, strong as a 'orse—stand up, you bastard—trained by our old friend Cap'n Dartry to all the duties of gennelmun's service. Speaks fluent English—speak up, Sambo; give the gennelmun a sample of yer lingo."

"God. Damn. Whiskey," croaked the creature, and broke off to cough. The cough rattled in him as in a cave of bones; presently he was exhausted, and spat blood. A jeer came from the spectators—aimed less at the unfortunate object than at the auctioneer, for attempting to foist such damaged goods upon them. The auctioneer grew angry, defending himself, swearing by a variety of sulphurous oaths that the youth needed no more than a few weeks' feeding to make him into a fine, sleek beast of burden. "There's Cap'n Crown! 'E knows nigger flesh when 'e sees it—there ain't no finer judge in Bristol. Speak up, Cap'n, and assure these people as don't know the diff'rence between a nigger and a belayin'-pin." A wink suggested that the speaker was prepared to make it worth Abiathar's while to sponsor the deal. Abiathar leaned over and spat between his feet, then deliberately smeared the spittle into the sawdust.

Someone had snatched the coat from the negro's body, and revealed a tuberculous torso, that shrank from the inspection it invited. His arms were like thin black pipes of rubber, the joints outstanding in lumps of swollen bone; and under all the frail dark web of the flesh ran a constant crepitation, as of endless apprehension, for which two partly healed weals that ran parallel a little above the kidneys accounted sufficiently—at least in the opinion of two of the spectators.

Someone, in mockery, offered five pence: the auctioneer ignored it, spent himself in the effort to work up the bidding. There was no further offer; the original bidder retired hastily, for fear of being called upon to ratify his bid. Even niggers were not to be buried for nothing. A shove sent the miserable object back to his corner, and Lot 14 was cried.

"If it were a horse, they'd shoot it out of pity," muttered Matthew, for, from the place where he stood, he could not but see the rejected negro, who, sunk again upon the ground, remained with closed eyes between whose lids glinted the upturned white: so patently marked with death that it seemed extraordinary he should not expire in their presence.

"I reckon a dying nigger ain't worth an ounce o' lead," said Abiathar simply. Matthew was not wont to look upon himself as a person of sensibility; yet he felt the words like a drop of ice-water down his spine. "If I go in for this business, I must get rid of my squeamishness," he told himself.

A little, bellowing boy of six or seven was the next to be offered, who, clouted on the woolly crane by the auctioneer's subordinate, still hurled to the ceiling his sense of woe, drowning the offers that were made for his small person. Naked but for his breech-clout, he had evidently been well treated, for his little body was as sleek as a seal's, covered with firm flesh the colour of a copper coin, and the teeth displayed by his monstrous yelling were white and bright as pearls in the pale-pink cavern of his enormous mouth. It was, to perfection, the kind of toy ladies of the period craved for their drawing-rooms, and, knowing what it would have fetched in the London market, Matthew was gratified when Abiathar, who was bidding on his behalf, secured the little negro for ten pounds.

"I'll send Africa for him later," said Matthew, grinning with satisfaction upon his purchase, who had suddenly lapsed into philosophical silence, and seemed no longer to care for much beyond playing with his bare toes, which, squatted upon the ground, he regarded with the serious attention a scientist might have brought to the examination of an uncommon specimen. "Here"—Matthew snapped his fingers as to a dog—"here—puppet! troglodyte! What name shall we find for you?"

The odd little object raised a hand and scratched its scalp; stared, rose to his feet, and, with pot-bellied unconcern, walked between Matthew's straddled legs, calmly to make water against the wall. "You'll need some training, Lilliput," commented its new owner, and turned to his companion. "Well, had we not better be going? I can imagine more salubrious surroundings than these—!"

A nudge in the ribs from Abiathar checked his commentary. They were crying Lot 15, amid a buzz of exclamations that filled the room suddenly with sly, capricious excitement. Matthew felt the pressure of bodies against his own—a thing he always resented—as the company craned forward, each

man eager to have first view of the subject which was the main reason for his presence.

Lot 15 appeared, an ebony sacrifice. Eyes of agate, polished and blank as pebbles, glittered immovably in the smooth, dark flesh; an elongated skull, covered in black moss, held yet the remnants of aboriginal pride in its curious angle, and there was beauty of a sort in the exotic sculpting of the profile, in its goddess-like remoteness from every standard of loveliness known to the beholders. A pair of hard, pointed breasts strove against the cotton chemise that stood for modesty in company where such virtue went unappreciated; there were immediately cries to remove it, which, helped by the gestures that accompanied them, she understood sufficiently to untie, with a somnambulistic movement of complete indifference, the knot that held it, and to wriggle her arms out of the loose sleeves.

An animal noise, suppressed in deference, not to the victim's sensibility, but to convention, went round the room. There were perhaps not more than half a dozen present, including Matthew, who did not make profession of virtue in their domestic lives, and to whom it would have been highly inconvenient if their presence at this eclectic scene came to public knowledge; but each knew there was no danger; each knew that he, and the man next to him, was a rutting stag; each felt, in those deepest and most shameful recesses of the human consciousness, the same desire to seek, in that glossy, odiferous flesh some transport denied him in his normal sexual experience. The tongue of a tiger, a heavy scent—at first intolerable, but more and more acceptable to the senses—the downward dripping of a terrible flower whose nectar was oblivion, blended in that raw essence of African forest, which reached out and lapped at these men who had known—most of them—nothing but their own lush countryside.

Gazing at those triumphant breasts that weighted a slender torso: at the globe-like swell of belly that pushed downwards a slack waistband, to reveal the deep, mysterious navel—even Matthew felt a sharp moment of surrender to this savage magic: a thing wholly apart from his love and desire for Pallas, a thing as deep and primeval as any that issues from the womb of race.

"A fine young African female," the auctioneer was bellowing, with sweat on his brow, which he wiped away from time to time, while his eyes went lasciviously to the object he was auctioning. "Newly arrived from Lisbon, and delivered of child four months back: since when, gennelmun, owing to the strict seclusion in which her owners have kept her, no further complications is to be apprehended. Twelve guineas? I take you, sir—an' the gennelman on your left, fifteen. Fifteen guineas: what advances on fifteen guineas for this fine young female slave—? Come, gennelmun, you wouldn't expect to get a mare as cheap! Fifteen guineas'-worth o' sweet, sound, female flesh—ripe as a plum an' hard as a nut—twenty—twenty-five—come, that's better—"

Two red-faced Bristol rips were bidding against each other, to a running accompaniment of guffawed obscenities from the rest of the company; she stood there, her breasts rising and falling with her deep breaths, insensible as though drugged to furtive handlings from a fortunate few who stood near enough to indulge their fascination for this warm, dark flesh, this sombre challenge to their hidden desires. One of the bidders objected to this encroach-

ment upon his future privileges; there was a scuffle, and someone was ejected from the room.

Despising their open swinishness, Matthew stood, with arms folded, wondering what it was like to make love with a negress; wondering if one ever got over the outrage to one's senses of the rank, negroid odour; wondering what response was to be expected from a being so insensible, so wholly lacking in physical or mental reaction as the negress—who, for all the attention she paid to the familiarities shown her, might have been in a state of catalepsy. It occurred to him to wonder whether she had been reduced to this state by former maltreatment; but there were no marks of ill-usage about her person, as in the case of the unhappy Lot 13. The only conclusion he was able to arrive at was that she was accustomed to another form of approach, and therefore that this pawing and fingering by men of another race meant nothing to her. In any case, she must have become used to it in the Lisbon market. He felt a profound contempt for the type of mind that would haggle for this stale flesh; while conceding all that was due to magnificence of physique. If he were ever tempted to experiment, it would be good, he thought, to snatch one of these splendid creatures fresh from her native forests; to drink the pure and unsullied draught of savagery from her lips and to surrender, for a while, one's own civilization to forces as primitive as those which animate the beasts of the jungle.

As the bidding was beginning to sag—the bold Bristolians evidently having misgivings—a poker-faced person who had not hitherto spoken launched an offer of fifty pounds, and secured not only the prize but the black looks of the company: for he was a stranger to Bristol, and as such was resented by the natives, who liked to keep their bargains for their own enjoyment. However, the stranger threw down a cheque, made some low-voiced arrangement with the auctioneer's clerk, and quickly left the room. Lot 15 was hustled into an inner apartment; the roll of her haunches and the lithe display of muscle that rippled from clavicle to the base of her spine remained to inflame the imagination of the defeated bidders.

II

“So now, Pally, you are twenty-one.”

“Yes, dear Papa, and wouldn't you say I look it? I can't tell you what an enormous distance there seems to be between yesterday and to-day: as though during the night I had taken a long journey—and, you know, this morning I am a little tired.” If she was tired, thought Ralph, she had never looked more beautiful. Indeed, it was alarming how Pallas had grown in beauty during the last few months: her rather voluptuous young figure having taken on more delicate lines. But the blue shadows under her eyes and the sweet patience of her mouth were reproaches to him; it did not need Lydia to tell him that his hoped-for scheme had not matured; that, as he had feared, Pallas's devotion to her lover was increased, rather than reduced, by their meetings. He was defeated, and his heart was sad. He had tried to console himself with the thought that he was not the first nor the only parent to build dreams of the future about a child who refused to help him to realize them. Apart from

being certain that marriage to Matthew would not bring happiness to either of them, he was deeply disappointed not to have young Peddy as a son-in-law and as the future support of his business.

He had, however, too genuine a nobility and too dear an affection for his child to hold out against a measure in which, however mistakenly, she believed her happiness to be involved. He felt old, sad and beaten, and his birthday embrace to Pallas was heavy with the heaviness of his spirit.

"I have two birthday gifts for you," he told her—and produced from its padded box the long string of golden filigree, studded with emeralds, which he had bought some years back, and which he and Lydia had agreed should be kept for Pally's coming of age. There were wide bangles to match, which, as he clasped them about her slim wrists, he counselled her to take off—"for I am not satisfied that the clasps are all they should be, and when next I go to London I shall take them to the jeweller who sold them to me, and tell him to have them made more secure."

"They are too beautiful, Papa! And I'm sure no girl in the world has so many lovely things as you and Mama have given me," she told him, as she kissed him for them.

"And yet you are not content."

"Content? *I?* Ah"—the colour ran into her cheeks as she took his meaning—"you are not so worldly, dear Papa, as to think that content rests upon such matters as these," she reproached him.

"I said I had two gifts for you, Pally," he said heavily, after a pause. "And if I tell you I would rather cut off my right hand than give you the second, I should not exaggerate. Indeed, I shall ever regard myself as something of a coward, for I am surrendering to a state of affairs I feel to be wrong and ill-advised, purely because I cannot endure that there should be a blight upon this relationship of ours, which has always been to me, as I hope it has been to you, a source of happiness and joy."

She had grown as pale as a moment ago she was red.

"Papa——"

"A few weeks before Christmas," he interrupted her, "something happened which hurt me more deeply than anything that has ever happened between us. You threatened me with the fact that you would soon be legally independent, and would avail yourself of it to go your own way."

"Oh, Papa, forgive me! I'd die sooner than wound you or Mama. But I had to make you understand how serious I was about M-Matthew"—she stammered upon the name because it was the first time, since that occasion, that she had spoken it in conversation with Ralph.

"You may have been right to do so: I can only say that I have never got your words out of my mind, and that I have come to the conclusion that, intolerable as it may be to go against my own convictions, and allow your betrothal to Matthew Flood, it would be even more intolerable if you should be moved to put your threat into action and depart from my house in defiance of all my wishes."

She was obliged suddenly to sit down, for her knees had turned to water.

"Are you telling me, Papa, that Matthew and I may be betrothed?"

"Not immediately; not until the case is over—for I will not have your name dragged into any mudraking such as I hear Jason Flood means to indulge,

for the support of his own suit. Then, if he loses the verdict"—Ralph shrugged his shoulders—"you will be a leader of Bristol society, whatever that means to you. If he gains, I suppose we shall have to take whatever steps are necessary to safeguard your future with a penniless husband."

She was unable to speak for the tears that flowed down her cheeks like rain.

"I do not deserve such goodness, dear Papa," she managed after a while to say.

"Have you got to marry him, Pally?" Ralph could not help saying.

Her eyes answered him.

"I fear, my love, the case will impose a sore trial upon your loyalty. I have feared to tell you all that I have learned lately about Matthew—lest you should ascribe such tales to malice, and, perhaps, in your mind, accuse me of prejudice for repeating them. It is true I have gone out of my way to find out as much as possible, for all our sakes; but, if you trust me, Pally, as you used to do, you will believe I was more concerned to find out the good than the evil, and it pains me to tell you how little there seems to be of the good."

"Isn't that always the way, Papa?" She raised her head to challenge him. "People always find the bad things more amusing than the good—that they generally think isn't worth mentioning. It at least shows that good is taken for granted; which, when you come to think of it, does not speak ill for humanity."

"You may be right; but, Pallas, there are things you should know, before plighting your troth with Matthew. Do you know that you are far from being the first woman to whom he has made professions that a man of honour reserves for his betrothed?"

"I find that easy to believe, dear Papa; and indeed I do not regret it. I think there can be few women who would not rather marry a man of experience than some raw bumpkin," answered Pallas sedately. "Papa, I am ready to assume that Matthew has done all the indiscreet and foolish things in the world, and I am not so simple as to imagine that marriage will make a new person of him. If he gets into trouble again, I pray Heaven will send me the wit to help him out; but I do assure you that at this present time he is disposed to all that I find good, and I think if he falls from this way of thinking it may be as much my fault as his. So I can only pray for more good sense than I'm conscious of possessing at the time of asking, and, if we fall into disagreement, trust to my instincts to preserve his affections."

III

"Lilliput, him plentiful bad-mannered boy, Mars' Matthew; cain't tame him nohow. Cain't make him wear him breeches, nor stop scratchin' hisself——"

"Has the tailor sent his clothes?" interrupted Matthew.

"Dey jes' come dis minnit, Mars' Matthew, an' dat Lilliput, he go pickin' round 'um passel like 'um magpie, till I had to tie him up in de pantry, where he bawl 'um haid awf——"

"Get him clothed and fetch him here; I want Phaeton in half an hour and you're to accompany me."

Matthew surveyed his purchase, not without amusement and satisfaction,

for the tailor had admirably executed his orders. A more exotic little figure than the clothed Lilliput it was impossible to conceive, in baggy breeches of salmon-coloured muslin, minute cut-away of crimson satin, whose gilt galoon edging matched the deep fringe of a sky-blue cummerbund. A tuft of parrot's feathers in the snowy turban completed one extreme: yellow Turkish slippers with upturned toes the other. Consciousness of splendour split his face into two halves, like a chocolate-coloured fruit displaying its snow-white seeds; he was disposed to strut, to posture with grotesque and unseemly gestures—inclinations which his owner proceeded to cuff out of him, scowling upon antics which, however appropriate they might have been in the simian tribe, were not to be encouraged in a drawing-room.

"He'll do, for the present; but we shall have to fetch him back and train him. He's got as little notion of behaviour as a monkey; see that he does not disgrace us at his presentation!"

Humour, he hoped, might triumph over delicacy, when Pallas saw this quaint sample of humanity which he had chosen for her birthday gift. He had been bidden to take an early dish of tea with the Burmester ladies—who, when he arrived, were in *déshabillé*, resting for the birthday party, to which, by Ralph's strict commands, Matthew was not bidden. It was impossible as yet to make formal announcement of the betrothal, and he did not trust either of the young couple not to flaunt their new-found happiness before the company. Bidding Africa keep Lilliput under his eye, Matthew had himself announced.

Pallas had risen, was coming towards him; Orabella, who had also jumped to her feet, was held back by a restraining movement of her mother's arm.

"Matthew——!"

"Orry!" he heard Lydia say—though his eyes were only for his lady. Never, never had she seemed so glorious, so radiant in her beauty, so illuminated with the delight of seeing her lover. Confounded, Matthew hung back: but there was no mistaking the meaning of the gesture with which she received him—that beautiful offering of all herself, so long denied, so hungrily desired.

"Pallas——!" He leapt towards her, wondering what it meant—not caring, as, for the first time since that day in the shrubbery, she was in his arms. Holding her crushed against his bosom, he turned to Lydia. "Does this mean——?"

"It means, dear Matthew," she said, coming forward, "that Ralph has withdrawn his objections——"

"We can be betrothed?" He was shaking from head to foot, and he could feel the trembling of Pallas's limbs along his own.

"You must first see Ralph, who wants to have a talk with you about the future."

"Aren't you going to kiss each other?" asked Orabella, pert though pale. She had been unprepared for this scene, and hovered—an excited vestal, before the shrine of love. Her naïve curiosity, and the urgent disappointment of her tones, made the lovers burst into laughter. Their eyes met in promise of raptures not to be indulged for the benefit of a little sister. Matthew raised Pallas's hands in both his own, and pressed a deep kiss into the softly curved shells.

"Does that satisfy you, miss?" he demanded of Orabella, who gave a *moue*

of disgust. "You shall have one for each year of your life—for each month, for each day," he muttered under his breath.

"And now," said Lydia, "you may have a quarter of an hour together, while Orry helps me to dress, and you, Matthew, mustn't detain Pally, who has to get ready to receive her guests."

"But, Matthew——!" cried Orry; "have you forgotten——?"

"By God——!" Matthew burst out laughing and chucked his future sister-in-law under the chin. "When you come to be betrothed, miss, you will perhaps not wonder at my lapse of memory. Did you think I had forgotten your birthday, Pallas? 'Close your eyes, my dear love, and you shall see whether or not I am a magician, who exists only to fulfil your lightest commands.'"

He clapped his hands, when, by previous arrangement with Africa, the door opened, and, to the accompaniment of a gasp from Lydia and Orabella, a rainbow atomy tottered into the room and, at the snap of Matthew's fingers—the only sign which, so far, he had learned surely to recognize—stumbled to his master's side.

"Oh, lud—oh, la!" gasped Orabella, and shot a glance of panic at her mother. Pallas opened her eyes.

"What——?"

Her lips, her eyes stiffened: she made a movement of unmistakable shrinking.

"Why——?"

With his hand on the nape of the creature's neck, Matthew ducked forward the turbanned head in a parody of obeisance.

"Permit me to present Lilliput, your future bodyguard. We have done our best, as you see, to disguise him in these odds and ends of peacockry, but it needs feminine taste to make an ornament of him."

"Where did you get it—him?" Her voice rustled; she put her hand to her throat, as though the cords hurt her.

Orabella, on her knees, was exclaiming with an extravagance of pleasure, as though to cover her sister's inarticulacy, "Oh, the doll, the absurdity, the enchanting mannikin! He is a thousand times better than Absalom——!"

"Get him? Nay, now, Pally, 'tis not fair to make me discover my arts as a magician."

"You *bought* him——?"

Matthew tweaked away the galloon band that encircled the puppet's neck, to reveal the thin circlet he had had welded on the previous night.

"And you need not fear losing him, for none, seeing this, will dispute your ownership."

With a movement of rejection, no less distinct than it was unpremeditated, Pallas turned and walked across the room.

"Pally, Pally, how rude you are! Pray, Matthew, excuse my sister, who is too excited to know what she's doing. 'Pon my soul, if I were to receive so enchanting a present on my birthday, I should jump over the moon for joy——"

"Orabella, go to your room. I suspect this is some of your mischief!" stammered Lydia, who was always confused when called upon to discipline her young daughter.

"Indeed, Mama, it's no such thing. If I thought it was high time Pally was cured of her nonsensical attitude to black servants—which are all the rage, and I've been positively humiliated in not owning one——"

"Orry, hold your tongue!"

"——and if I suggested to Matthew a means of overcoming her ridiculous fancy——! And if Pally won't keep it, I shall, for it's surely the charmingest toy I ever saw in my life——"

"Will you be silent, miss?—Pallas, what does this mean? What have I done to wound you, to offend you?" shouted Matthew, above the shrillness of Orabella's protestations.

"Forgive my discourtesy, dearest Matthew," said Pallas, recovering her self-possession. "But there is really no painfuller sight to me than one of these poor, enslaved creatures, to whose cause of freedom I am wholly devoted, and whose existence is a blot upon the human race."

"But, Pally," said Matthew, when they were alone—Lydia having taken Orabella, whose ears she was sorely tempted to box, out of the room, and the unconscious cause of the scene having been temporarily banished, in charge of Africa, while his future was thrashed out—"though I can appreciate your sympathy with victims of the slave traffic—about which there has been a great deal too much written and spoken, and I, if it came within my province, would put a stop to the circularization of such disagreeable details—I am totally at a loss to understand your views about this little animal that I brought with no idea save to give you pleasure."

"I know there are plenty of people who, though they abominate the slave trade and are pledged to suppress it, still keep black servants," said Pallas, and the significance of that high, clear brow and sculpted chin were never more apparent. "But, for myself, I will never countenance it. It seems to me wholly wicked to take advantage of the ignorance of these poor, helpless creatures, by availing ourselves of their labours——"

"Come, Pally, what 'labour' do you expect out of a creature like Lilliput? He's a toy, an amusement for wet days—like a parrot or a monkey; that you do not fret about when they are put back in their cages until it pleases you to play with them again."

"How can you speak so of a human being?" she reproached him. "If it were a child of my own, I should feel no less obliged to it for all the considerations due to a little creature who will one day bear man's image, and inherit all the qualities that belong to humanity as distinct from the beasts."

"Like all women, Pally, you sentimentalize the negro," said Matthew. "Having seen only those specimens which, brought into contact with our civilization, have acquired certain habits that belong to us, you cannot imagine the creatures in their native state, which is that of the beasts from whom you profess to distinguish them. Pray, my dear love, be sensible: accept this little animal, and if you treat him only one half so well as Orabella treats her kitten, his lot will be an enviable one."

"And when he grows up?"

"You can have him trained for house service, like Africa; or, if he ceases to please you, you will not have the least difficulty in disposing of him—since there is a constant demand for negro servants."

"But, don't you see, dear Matthew, that is precisely what I could not do?"

Make a pet of a thing, and then, when it ceases to amuse, force upon it the rigours of an existence to which it is not used, and for which it may have no aptitude."

"A horse, in its native condition, may have no aptitude for drawing a cart; yet how soon it is broken to the harness!"

"Broken; yes, that is the word," she said in a low voice. "Why should a human being be 'broken' to habits that are foreign to its nature?"

The end of their wrangling, which was put a stop to by Lydia, who came to urge upon her daughter the necessity of delaying no longer in her dressing, was that Matthew found himself still saddled with Lilliput, whom he took by the back of the neck and threw across the front of his saddle like a small sack, and reduced to shrieks of horror, on his gallop back to Brandon Hill.

It was typical of Flood egoism that he saw, in the foregoing conversation, no serious menace to the future he had planned for them both.

IV

The lawsuit was held up, because Clay insisted upon marshalling every possible shred of evidence before giving notice of appearance. As Jason's case consisted largely of an attack upon the defendant's character, and most of his witnesses were resident in London, Clay had suggested they should apply for a hearing in town: a suggestion which met with objection not only from Jason, who angrily protested the impossibility of absenting himself for so long from the business, but from Shergill, who objected, on his client's behalf, to the expense of taking Matthew's witnesses to London. "And what about my client?" demanded Clay. "You brought the case," said Shergill, "so that's your look out, ain't it?"

It was then to have come on at Bristol Assizes, but a deputation of local authorities, waiting upon both parties, represented so strongly the imprudence of having a case of such public interest tried in their city, where it would certainly lead to rioting, and involve great damage and injury to property and individuals, that Clay finally made application to plead at Gloucester—where, in the month of June, in the year 1761, was actually listed the great Flood lawsuit, which might have exhausted the fortune it disputed, but for a series of unforeseen events that brought it to a dramatic conclusion within a few weeks of its début.

It was during those dull, preceding months that the *Cassiopeia*, which had become almost a permanent feature of the local panorama, beautiful and null as a museum piece, swarmed suddenly with an army of workmen, her pale, full-breasted figurehead bursting into blues and scarlets and a lavish ribandry of gold-leaf. This exciting spectacle attracted a horde of youngsters, who stood round-eyed and spellbound as the ship put on her beauty, for since the wars the painting of ships, unless they were ships of war, had been much neglected, and there were actually some scores of small boys and girls who were too young ever before to have seen the grand and fanciful sight of a newly painted brig displaying to the full her owner's pride.

A brief spread of canvas, as quickly furled; explosions of gunpowder from firing pieces under technical inspection; gang-planks down, and ceaseless

processions between decks and quayside; cranes incessantly swinging from shore to hold—these were part of a miracle of resurrection that captured the imagination of a multitude of persons who, having little else to do but lounge upon the waterfront, shared the palpitations of life that stirred ever more and more strongly in her moribund timbers.

The *Cassiopeia* had got her charter and was fitting for the Guinea voyage; and among those who watched her preparations appeared, perhaps more frequently than was prudent, in that place where rumour swelled like a puff of wind in the moonsail, young Matthew Flood, who had assented to Shergill's proposal that his share in the ownership should remain, for the present, a secret. "It 'ud look odd, and there's no sense, with the case ahead, in creatin' prejudice. So far's outsiders are concerned, Peddy and I've taken up the extra share between us—see? It'll save argyment and explanation, not to mention a pother of gossip."

An autocratic figure governed the activities on board the *Cassiopeia*, and, in pursuit of duties which, in those days, rested not with a clerical staff, but with the shipmaster in person, ranged magnificently through wholesale houses, whose cultivation of his custom accounted for a pleasant lining of guineas in the full, crimson skirts of a galloon-laced coat that eclipsed in its new-made splendour any other to be seen upon the waterfront. The Honiton cascading from beneath a blazing beard, no less than the black tricorn and wrought-silver buckles of a pair of wide-tongued shoes, advertised his altered circumstances in no uncertain fashion—and Abiathar let it go at that. He could, had there been time, have worked off very prettily some of the snubs he had received during his ill-luck period; but in Abiathar, as in most physically noble men, there was no rancour.

All of his will and energy was bent to proving his worth of the confidence Matthew had reposed in him. The latter had not disguised the difficulty he had had in inducing Shergill and Peddy to accept Abiathar as master. Abiathar had taken the account good-humouredly, resenting it even less than Matthew.

"I suppose I got a good few enemies in these parts," he said frankly. "You see, afore I went up to Liverpool, I'd been getting on too quick for one or two folk as though they was entitled to things that fell, in a manner o' speaking, at my feet. And why not? There's a deal o' luck in shipping, cock, and may be I got more'n my share, a few years back. May be I'd got above myself, an' so luck came swinging round and caught me a clap on the ear, just to l'arn me! Well, I never was no scholar, but that's one o' the things I don't need l'arning twice."

"When are you reckoning to get away?" Matthew asked him.

Abiathar's fist crashed on the table at which they were sitting.

"We could be off next week! She's ready an' impatient as a racehorse, and there's not an inch of her that's not fit to sail round the Horn. It's the plaguy labour we're lacking: unless we take the scum an' leavings from the ships of war. To hell with Pitt and his quotas! There ain't a decent seaman to be had since the bounties was started. May be their fine bloody lordships'll find out it's not the navy wins the wars, but the merchant ships, that can holla for men, while all the rapscallions flocks to man the guns!"

CHAPTER XIII

I

IT WAS the month of May when young Sam Peddy, having struggled gallantly with a broken heart, told his parents he was going to the wars. His eldest brother Peter having already been killed in the service of Prussia, there still remained three more boys, including Sam, to carry on the family business; and Sam, the mildest, the steadiest, the most stay-at-home, had less trouble than he had anticipated in convincing his family that his duty to his country came before his duty to the shipping industry.

Pallas felt very bad about it. When he came to bid melancholy farewell to his lady, showing in every line of a dejected countenance his consciousness of defeat, she was so tender that poor young Sam very nearly took heart, and for quite half an hour considered resigning his commission. When, six months later, the news of his death reached Pallas, she wept for one of the most faithful and humble of her admirers.

In view of the rumoured war with Spain, there was quite a little burst of recruiting, and many were the embroidered favours the Misses Burmester distributed, inscribed with suitably patriotic sentiments. Those were hectic days, of desperate proposals and tearful rejections. The shameless Orabella, transported, at last, by two formal offers of marriage, scattered right and left promises light as roseleaves. "It's no use binding oneself in such times as these," she shocked her sister by declaring, "for mourning don't become me; but there is no harm in giving a few of the poor creatures the encouragement of hope!"

At the Grand Ball which was organized to celebrate the glorious victory of the *Constantine* (one of the last of the Bristol privateers) over the unfortunately christened *Victoire*, Orabella presented for the first time a serious challenge to her sister—many declaring that the younger Burmester girl bade fair to out-rival Miss Pallas: a statement hotly contested by admirers of the latter. However that might be, it was at this ball that Orry captured for ever the heart of Lord Edward Sax, who was with the Duke of Beaufort's party, and all unwittingly—because, for all her impudence, she was inclined to be shy with "the gentry," and was almost too overcome to utter when Lord Edward asked her to dance—settled a future which had begun seriously to perturb her parents. For, if Pally was, up to the coming of Matthew, quite indifferent to masculine advances, with Orabella it was quite the opposite. She was a raging flirt, and Ralph had several times threatened to find a duenna who should take charge of his younger daughter when her mother was too lazy to do so.

As for Pallas, she was, as always, besieged by partners. Her soaring beauty seemed, like the loaded chandeliers, to diffuse a light of its own. It was mortifying to be unable publicly to proclaim one's title to this coveted prize, but each time he danced with her there was conscious aggression in Matthew's bearing; he took every opportunity of marking his contempt for those sprigs

of the nobility who, neglecting their partners, focused on Pallas an attention that reduced to paroxysms of jealousy every other woman in the room.

She wore her emerald filigree, with a ball-gown of Madras yellow, whose lacy flouncings, stiffened with gum arabic, lent to her movements a kind of rhythmic flow; passionate lover of the dance, she assumed instinctively all the coquetry implicit in movements that were meaningless performed in the stiff, dancing-academy fashion current among the young ladies of Bristol. A flame of pride ran through Matthew, as he thought what a sensation she would cause in a London ballroom. If only all went well for him, what opportunities would be his, for placing this jewel in the setting it deserved!

In her sweet, unresentful way she had entirely forgiven him for his *gaffe* in the matter of the little negro boy. She even demanded to know what arrangements he was making for the little creature, and Matthew, quite lacking the courage to tell her that he had as good as settled to sell Lilliput to Lady Gannet, whose Absalom was going into the lanky and unattractive stage of adolescence, stammered and reddened, until she told him that she had resolved to take the poor mite: not to be reared as a drawing-room pet, but to be brought up in a simple Christian fashion, to be sent to school when old enough and prepared to live, later on, a useful life in a Christian community.

"Of course we can't keep him at home," said Pallas seriously, for Orabella would quite ruin him! But our dear old nurse Mary, who lives on the common, and loves all little children, will look after him until he is old enough for the discipline of school."

He had had, a few days earlier, a conversation with Ralph that had done something to ease their relationship, though its conclusion was not wholly satisfactory to either party.

Frankly deploring the unsettled state of Matthew's prospects, Ralph asked him point-blank whether, in the event of the verdict's going to Jason, Matthew had any means of supporting a wife.

"I wish I could give you a definite answer to that," said Matthew, with equal candour. "I am obliged, however, to admit that my affairs could hardly be in worse fettle than they are at present."

"Do not consider the question I am about to put to you offensive," said Ralph, after a pause, "but is there any truth in the suggestion that you are basing your plans for the future rather on your wife's dowry than upon your own resources?"

"That is a fair question, sir," answered Matthew, "and it would be hypocrisy on my part to deny that the dowry has entered into my calculations. If fortune favours me, I shall be in a position to dispense with such considerations, but as I am unable to depend on fortune, I can at least give you assurance that whatever provision you may think fit to make for your daughter's comfort shall be employed strictly to secure for her a standard of living as near as possible to that which she is accustomed."

"What assurance can you give me of that?" asked Ralph sharply.

Matthew looked straightly at him.

"Only my word. But if you care to make it more binding by some document prepared by your attorney, I'll be glad to set my hand to it."

The elder man looked more kindly at him. Mistrustful as he still was of Matthew, he had felt, on each occasion of their meeting, this same inclination

to like a man who respected and appreciated his own attitude. At the same time, he hated gamblers, and meant to make sure that Pallas's future was not at the mercy of a habit as ineradicable, in his experience, as the habits of inebriation or sexual vice.

"You may have heard, Mr. Flood"—he still maintained the formalities of address with Matthew—"that I am a rich man. Riches, as you know, are a matter of comparison, and in comparison with your grandfather's, my means are very moderate indeed. I am not in a position to detach a large portion of capital with which to endow my daughters, and such payments as I am able to make their husbands will be in the nature of interest on my business, and must vary from time to time in accordance with my own fortunes."

"That is agreeable to me, sir."

"I am right in saying, am I not, that you have no settled occupation?"

"My business, sir, is brokerage; but since that supposes a certain capital, my abilities for the moment are cramped," admitted Matthew.

"You are also very considerably in debt," pointed out Ralph.

"That, unavoidably," was the answer.

"Was it always 'unavoidable,' Mr. Flood? Pardon me"—he smiled suddenly, and made a little movement as though he would have touched Matthew's hand, which lay clenched on the table—"it is not my intention or my place to moralize. Supposing I should make you an offer. Supposing that, in the event of your losing your legacy, I should take you into my business——"

"Into the wool trade?" Matthew could not conceal his surprise.

Ralph nodded. Matthew bit his lip, considering—not the acceptance of such an offer, which held no attractions for him, but how to extricate himself from it without offending his father-in-law.

"I'm very sensible of the generosity of your offer, sir," he said presently, "and I see I shall have to take you into my confidence. I told you at the beginning of our conversation that my affairs are in a poor state, but I'm not content they should remain so, and, having been accustomed to rely on my own efforts, rather than on benevolence, to rescue me from my difficulties, I have already taken steps to improve them. In two or three years I may be in a tolerable position, and after that there seems no reason I should not continue to increase my means on lines that proved very profitable to my grandfather, and I hope will favour me as well." He stopped and drew a long breath. "I am resolved, sir, to go in for the Guinea trade."

"Shippings?" Ralph was astonished. "But surely that needs a bigger capital than you led me to think stands at your disposal."

"When a man is as deeply in debt as I am," said Matthew, "he doesn't hesitate to add another thousand or two to his commitments! I have, as a matter of fact, secured a part-ownership in a ship now chartered for the African coast, and though the discharge of my debts will certainly absorb the whole of my profits on the first voyage, and may make considerable inroads on the second, I shall gradually become independent and secure myself a moderate competence by means, if you will forgive me, sir, for saying so, more within the range of my tastes and capacities than I'd find the wool trade."

"Well, you've certainly taken me by surprise." Ralph had dropped the formality of his manner; his blue eyes held a glint of humour as he looked

across at his companion. "You can't be accused of lack of enterprise, at all events! I have engaged, from time to time, in a shipping venture, and your grandfather tried hard to persuade me to fall in with some of his larger schemes; but, for one reason or another, I never went into them."

"Perhaps I'll be able to persuade you to extend your experience, sir." The quick thought went through Matthew's mind that it would not be at all a bad idea if his father-in-law came into partnership with him. Ralph's credit and his vast knowledge of commerce would certainly be of value in launching a new venture. But Ralph shook his head.

"So you're going in for the slave trade. Well, you're right to take time by the forelock—they say Bristol shippers have had the best of it so far, but the tide's changing. And what's Pally's view of your venture?"

"I have said nothing to her so far," confessed Matthew. "I am advised to keep it quiet, until the case has been heard."

Ralph looked at him shrewdly.

"You have good advisers. Remember that it pays to make use of others' experience, in the beginning. But I'm afraid your news is not likely to meet with a very warm reception. In common with many of our Bristol ladies, Pallas is a fiery supporter of abolition!"

"I'm well aware of that, sir! However, I hope that the practical considerations of our future, together with the complaisance due from a wife towards her husband's occupation, will dispense with any serious opposition, when it comes to the point."

"H'm," said Ralph doubtfully. It was evident he did not share Matthew's confidence about the "complaisance." "I suppose time will show . . . but I advise you to go softly with Pally! She has a very—ah—unfeminine strength of opinion, on subjects that involve her conscience."

"At least I may hope for your support, sir?" Matthew spoke with less assurance than usual; he found himself touched and delighted by Ralph's evident change of attitude. But, as though to warn him he was taking too much for granted, the latter drew coldly back.

"I have never concealed from you," said Ralph, almost sadly, "that I would give much for you not to marry Pallas. Yet, as her happiness matters more to me than anything in the world, I hope that your fortunes prosper. If ever you injure Pallas"—his voice broke; he leaned forward, and his face was the face of an old man—"as there is a God in heaven, I'll break you, if it takes my last penny and my last drop of blood to do so!"

Without waiting for Matthew's reply, he rose and went quickly from the room.

II

Little sympathy, so far, has been invited for Jason Flood: and, indeed, it was not a sympathetic personality. Yet it would be to suppress an essential element in our narrative wholly to ignore his share in the tug and drag of emotion that swept his immediate circle.

Jason was an able, but he was not a strong, man. For strength he depended absolutely (he would have been the last to acknowledge it) on the woman he

had married. It was she who had forced his mildly evangelical opinions into the narrow, iron mould of her own religious sect; it was she who harried Jason into active support of Mr. Wesley at a time when that gentleman was not in the strong position he afterwards occupied in Bristol. Jason's latter-day zeal was the zeal of the proselyte, which bids fair to outrun the zeal of its instigator.

In all matters of religious and moral conduct, Ann Flood was wont to declare, she and her husband were of one mind; she took care it should be so. Jason's hardness was the stubborn hardness of the fundamentally weak; he clung tenuously to the illusion that he was the supreme governor of his household, and Ann saw to it that there was nothing to undeceive him.

But over the matter of Hercules' will, for the first time in her life, she deserted him. Apart from the fact that the law was to her an evil, an unholy thing, she was terrified of losing, not merely the fortune, but the little capital on which, if their suit failed, their future depended. She would not risk a sprat to catch a whale, and she believed Jason to be insane, because he insisted upon doing so.

His sleepless nights were rendered more horrible by her ceaseless moaning, by the pictures she drew of herself and the girls, when Jason was gone, having to beg their bread from door to door. A red-eyed, grey-lipped shadow, she gibbered at his elbow; she infected the household, so that there were days when he was surrounded by lachrymose hags, silently reproaching the author of their torment; but this, instead of weakening his determination, hardened it beyond belief. Now, if ever, he had to prove his masculine omnipotence.

His prayers became awfully confused; in the same breath he would entreat the patience and long-suffering of Job, and the sword of the Lord for the destruction of his enemies. His walks abroad were periods of torture; among his self-deceptions, he had never entertained the belief that he was popular—in fact, to have been so would have reflected upon the strait severity of his creed; but now he began to believe that all the town was mocking him, was gloating upon the prospect of his downfall; and he swore most unchristianly that they should repent of their malice.

He spent long hours with Clay, poring over Matthew's dossier, which was reaching fantastic proportions; in fact it seemed as though any one was ready, for a consideration, to produce some sort of ill-witness against his nephew. To do Clay justice, he rejected much of the offal this dredging brought up; counsel had warned him against creating an impression of malice or virulence. He did his best to impress on Jason that a cold dignity and persuasion of right would serve him better than acrimony; but it is hard to impress a man who has almost reached the point of insanity.

For, to add to his other torments, Jason had the anguish of exposing his private affairs in the courts; the name of Flood was to receive a blow the like of which it had never known in all its centuries of honourable fame. A member of the family was to be shown up as a fraud, an adventurer and a dishonourable trickster, and but for the magnitude of the sum involved, Jason would have died before fouling the tradition upon which the whole substance of his life was built.

In desperation, Ann Flood called upon her nephew. He would scarcely have recognized the haggard scarecrow, if he had met it in the street. He

received her in the small room that had been Hercules' office: a panelled chamber hung with very beautiful coloured prints of sea subjects, over which presided the Kneller portrait of his grandmother—a bland, handsome creature, with cushioned shoulders rising from a crumple of blue satin. There was something shocking about the contrast between the two women: the rich, calm and voluptuous châtelaine of Triton Lodge, and the one who might become her successor—thin, meagre, almost beggarly in her economical garments, in whose poor folds her fingers twitched nervously.

"What is to become of us?" she asked, with dry lips that shook.

"To become of you? You have every prospect, my dear aunt, of being rich beyond the dreams even of *your* avarice," was the cynical retort.

"But supposing we are not? If the judge should declare in your favour, nothing remains for us but penury," she persisted.

"Aunt," said Matthew slowly, "I suppose you are thinking, in your own idiom, of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. I won't deny you owe me a tooth or two; yet, for some reason, I have no particular desire to exact them."

"I don't know what you mean," she quavered.

"I haven't given much thought—yet—to what I shall do with the money, if it comes to me." It was a lie, but he would not give her the satisfaction of knowing that his nights were sleepless (as he guessed hers were) and every nerve in his body aching with the prolonged tension. "I have not thought of anything. . . . But it seems to me I shall not want the timberyard."

"You—you would give it to us?"

"Give? Why should I give you anything?" he retorted roughly. "What have you thought of giving me, if the luck runs your way? I'll bet consideration for my plight hasn't entered into any of your calculations."

"Your uncle is nothing if not a just man——!"

"Justice, my dear aunt, is a thing that can be bought—at a price: and I've little use for it. But I'll sell the timberyard to Jason, if he wants to carry it on."

"Sell?" she shrieked. "With what are we to buy it?"

Matthew smiled thinly.

"It seems as if I'm better informed on your affairs than you are on mine. I know the wages uncle Jason has been drawing, and I know, from experience, the style in which you've lived, the last twenty years. Don't tell me there isn't a very good little nest-egg at Jason's disposal, if he wants to purchase the business."

"What will be left of that, if we lose the case?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"What indeed? If Jason's fool enough to dispute a perfectly sound and legal will, he, and the rest of you, must take the consequences." He swung his leg over the arm of the chair in which he was sitting. "You've always had uncle Jason under your thumb; why don't you make him call it off, before it's too late?"

He almost pitied her, as he saw the look of horror and despair that came into her eyes that were fixed on him.

"You'd take the last crumb out of our mouths," she murmured.

"In my experience, aunt, you don't need crumbs to nourish you: upon my soul, I think you've trained your family to live on air."

"You are all I expected," she said bitterly, as she gathered her thin skirts, preliminary to rising.

"Not quite," said Matthew dryly. "I shall naturally want a large price for the timberyard: a price I'm persuaded I can get from an outside bidder, if Jason doesn't rise to the offer. I'll get it valued, and let you know what it's worth."

"You need not trouble yourself," said Ann viciously. "If we lose the case, we shan't have the price of a handful of firewood."

"Nonsense!" Matthew smiled broadly. "And you can tell uncle Jason I'm willing to make terms, so long as he meets me. I'll engage to spread out the payments over a term of years, on condition that if I happen to be the one who's left destitute, he'll spare me the double of what I've inherited from Father. In this way we can both secure ourselves the means of tolerable existence, in despite of the law. My lawyer can draw up the agreement and we'll set our names to it, if uncle is willing. Come, aunt! It'll pay you to back me over this proposition."

"Why should we accept terms from you?" Her sallow face was flushed with resentment.

"You're changing your tune," said Matthew softly. "You began on a lower note, my dear aunt, and, to speak plainly, I found it vastly more beguiling. Put my proposal before uncle Jason; he is no fool in matters of business, and I fancy he may find it worth while considering—unless that old blockhead Clay has so cocked him up with assurance of his success that he despises precautions. Why, if it comes to that, need either of us be paupers? It's devilish embarrassing and annoying to have poor relations!—as I think you'll find uncle will agree."

It is hardly to be doubted that Jason would have rejected the proposal outright—his pride outraged at the idea of bargaining with the nephew he hated—had it not been for an incident which, more than his wife's jeremiads and the mental stress under which he laboured, shook his belief in his own security.

In a bleak dawn he awoke, after the first patch of uneasy sleep his thoughts had allowed him: his body burning with exhaustion, his eyes like sores in the head from which he dragged the sweaty nightcap. A pitiable figure, bowed and meagre, with nightgown flapping about uncertain knees, he went out on the landing to rouse the maidservants. There was a little window on the landing, that had been broken, and through which came a draught as sharp as the cutting edge of a knife. As it smote him, he gave a gasp, staggered a little, then lurched against the wall. His left leg . . . there was something . . . He tried to walk, and almost fell. He cried out for Ann.

When she came—scarecrow in a shawl thrown over her nightshift—he could feel nothing in his left hand. Her arms around his bones, she managed to drag him back to their room. He was totally paralysed down the left side.

Within a few days it had passed; Jason was in his office at the timberyard, but he had to move cautiously, with the aid of a stick, and the report of his condition flew over the yard. Cold, bitter, narrowly just as always, he ruled his affairs; but hidden beneath that invincible exterior was an unsteady heart,

a brain troubled by a new doubt. Supposing that were to happen again? Supposing he were to die? No one could judge better than himself the strain offered by the present situation to a constitution never particularly robust.

Matthew, meanwhile, had seen Shergill, and told him of the proposition, of which he did not think badly.

"It ain't a bad notion to hedge. You might have made a better bargain for yourself."

"It gives me no pleasure to be beholden to my uncle," said Matthew haughtily. "If I have an income of four hundred and fifty to depend on, you can be sure I'll double it within a twelvemonth, and my wife's money will provide for our immediate needs." He had told Shergill of the position in regard to Pallas: which had much encouraged the sly lawyer, since, if it secured no active support, it would prevent their having Ralph as an opponent.

Together they concocted a document, which Matthew put in his pocket and took to his uncle at the counting-house. He was received as frigidly as he had expected—but Jason signed. Neither revealed to the other the relief the two signatures brought.

III

In Seamill the *Cassiopeia* went on placidly preparing for the Guinea voyage, and the lading and provisioning went on steadily, though it was hard to secure a crew. It was never easy to man a slave-ship, there being little to choose, in the opinion of the common sailor, between slaving and the navy—the brutalities of discipline being about equal, and the disgusting hardships attendant on caring for the cargo revolting all but the least squeamish.

Slaver captains were famous for their atrocities and for the ill-usage of their crews, and it was only through the instrumentality of the taverns and the connivance of landlords with merchants that the ships sailed with their full complement of men. The crimps were doing their best, but they were in competition with the press-gangs, which raged in Bristol, as in every other port.

Experience bade Abiathar take his time; the stuff the crimps brought in was not worth shipping, though it must serve if none better afforded: but he insisted upon the necessity of getting at least half a dozen who were full seamen, and would, as he put it to Matthew, keep the riff-raff on the move.

Partly to divert his mind from other matters, Matthew was taking the closest interest in every detail of the *Cassiopeia's* equipment, and was so frequently seen in Abiathar's company, when the latter went about his business for his new owners, that it began to be freely said that the young cock was taking after the old 'un, and in certain circles the opinion was mooted that Matthew had a more than objective interest in the slaver.

Abiathar, when this came to his ears, warned Matthew, for he fully agreed with Shergill and Peddy that Matthew's share in the ownership should be kept dark. He suspected Peddy of the leakage; in his cups, the merchant was known to commit indiscretions—his wife and daughter bearing plentiful witness to this: for the Peddy ladies were the most copious and best-informed gossips in the town, and some awkward situations had been caused by Mrs.

Peddy's blurring out information which could only have been gained in marital privacy.

Ever since the party at Triton Lodge, Mrs. Peddy had set her heart on the conquest of Matthew for her Clara, and there was in consequence a marked coolness between the Peddy and Burmester families. Orabella and Clara, erstwhile bosom friends, now exchanged sweetly acidulated smiles instead of confidences, and Orabella flatly refused to invite "that Clara" to the farewell tea-party given by the Burmester ladies to a select few of Bristol's gallant defenders. "I won't have that bold creature setting herself up as a rival to my Pally!" she declared.

"Poor girl, she knows nothing of Matthew's affairs and mine," reproached Pallas. "And you and she have been friends since you were both in your cradles——"

"Well, perhaps it's not entirely because of that, admitted Miss Orabella, a little sheepishly. "But I don't see why she should push herself forward at my tea-party. After all, no gentleman can be expected to court two ladies at the same time."

Pallas, laughing, begged to be told the name of the gentleman in question, but Orabella, unwontedly bashful, tossed her curls and ran away. She had begun to be a little disturbed by some mysterious verses that reached her from time to time, signed only with the initial "E." Who indeed was "E"? She had no such initial in the long list of her acquaintances, but "E" had sent her a wonderful valentine, a mass of silver lace and perfumed violets, with *such* a verse on it——!

"Since first I heard your lovely name
My very heart is in a flame.
Would that I dare reveal thee mine
And claim thee for my Valentine!"

Short, but so poignant; enough to make Clara Peddy burn with envy. It was really too divinely provoking not to have the least idea who "E" might be: but, at least, to be going on with, there was Arthur Vale, who was gazetted a Cornet in the Dragoon Guards and just about to leave for India. She was not minded to share the thrill of those farewells with any Clara!

"I am almost glad of this horrible lawsuit," declared Pallas, when Matthew came to bid her farewell, on the eve of departure for Gloucester. "It at least prevents your going to the wars."

She looked fondly up at him, thinking, as some others thought, how vastly her lover had changed in the past months. Matthew still looked older than his years, and the unmistakable traces of rakish experience were not to be eliminated from his features, but there was a new dignity about him, a sort of sober responsibility of a young prince preparing for his kingdom. How could any one doubt that Matthew was the right man to inherit his grandfather's fortune? There was something so noble, so nearly aristocratic about him, to her partial eyes, and the rich and sombre clothing he affected enhanced the almost foreign darkness of his colouring, so that he was inevitably the most striking figure in any gathering he frequented. He was one of the few men to wear his own hair, instead of a peruke, and the glossy, blue-black

curls, as solid and as sculpturesque as the finest specimen of the peruquier's art, gave daily employment to the hairdresser, who, after many blunders and twice as many cursings, had at last achieved a coiffure that bore not ill the comparison between itself and the achievements of his London rivals.

"I hate the wars, Pally, because they ruin trade," he told her soberly, "but I'd sooner have them than what is to come. As a soldier one is, at least to some extent, master of one's fate; but in the law courts they make a pawn of you."

"It would take more than law courts to make a pawn of you, my dear love!" They stood breast to breast, deep-drowning in each other's eyes; he gave a gasp and dragged her to him.

"My glorious Pally! We'll make a world for ourselves, shall we? A blossoming wilderness, with you and me as King and Queen. I can do it, my love—I know: so long as you're by my side. Only give me a little time, and I'll build you such a palace as has never been outside a fairy tale. I'll have carpets of gold and every nail shall have a diamond for its head." He laughed excitedly. "And we'll sail, Pally; we'll sail the farthest seas. You shall see all the lands you long to visit, and you'll be treated like a princess everywhere you go. I vow I'll do it for you—and to hell with grandfather's money. I'm not a Flood for nothing; we've all—except my father—been captains of commerce, and I—I mean to be a generalissimo. *Trade*, Pally! It's in my blood. Apart from you, it's my only passion. Starting with a cowrie shell and ending with—" He threw back his head and flung his arms wide with a gesture that embraced all of the scene about them.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her about his new venture, but something held it back. If the worst befell, he would at least have that to comfort her with: his four hundred and fifty a year and his part ownership in the *Cassiopæia*—together with whatever Ralph would give her. No bad beginning for their life of adventure.

"We'll make the town talk about us, Pally! We'll give 'em a new city hall, perhaps. I'll build new almshouses—it's either that or extend the present ones, that aren't nearly big enough for what is needed. I'll have the effigy of grandfather executed in marble and put on Brandon Hill, with all his ships in *basso-rilievo* round the pediment—a delicate reminder to Jason, each time he passes that way!" He did not pause to see the shadow on her fair face. "I swear to you, Pally, we shall come to our kingdom, in despite of lawyers. I never had such disposition to succeed until I found you—my darling, my golden reason for being!" He crushed his lips on hers before ending, on a graver note: "And we shall live like gods all the days we are young, and in our old age have joy of our memories; till we come to lie, side by side, under our two marble selves, in the Redcliff; for I'll share no musty vault with you, my starry queen! We'll leave the family vault for those who've never watched the moon rise over African palms, never sought the Sphinx's secret and never worn the plumes of Paradise in their hair!"

He became aware of her eyes, gazing at him through a film of tears.

"What is it, my love—my sweet?" He caught her hands to his breast.

"It was just that—for a moment—I saw you old, like your grandfather, as I remember him when I was a little girl."

Chilled for a moment, Matthew muttered.

"I'm glad you saw him then—and not later. I used to think he was rather a fine old fellow when I was a boy."

"I must have been very young," said Pallas, "for I had just reached King Charles the Second in my history; and I remember thinking that King Charles might have looked very much like your grandfather, if he had lived to be an old man. You, dear Matthew, are very like the king; I remarked it on the night of our first meeting."

He teased her lovingly for flattery, but rewarded the compliment with a kiss.

"I have a keepsake for you," she told him later. "I asked Papa's leave—because I thought it might bring you luck. He gave it me on one of my birthdays because I asked for it, but it's very old, and hardly, as you see, a lady's adornment."

It was a ring of old, pale gold, moulded in the form of a serpent with its tail in its mouth—the symbol, declared Pallas, of eternal felicity. On the inner circumference was an inscription in faint lettering: *Gloria virtutis umbra*.

"Your father said I could have it?"

"He joined his good wishes to mine; he will be seeing you before I do." Ralph had accepted Shergill's subpoena on his client's behalf, and had arranged to combine business with his visit to Gloucester, where he was staying with Lydia's relations.

"Would it be of any use to ask him once more to let us be betrothed before I go away?"

She shook her head.

"I would not do it, dear heart. Father is coming slowly to our point of view, but it is never wise to hurry him. This"—she touched the ring which he had slipped on his finger—"is as much a token of his goodwill as of mine."

"While I live, it will never leave my hand. I must be off; Shergill leaves by the morning coach, and I promised to see him before he goes. Fordyce is riding with me—we set out with the dawn. If we pass this way, will you be at your window, Pally?"

"Indeed I shall."

"And you'll give me your blessing?"

"I'll do more than that. I shall pray for you, morning and night, all the time you are away."

"You'll end by making a Christian of me," he said—roughly because he was so deeply moved by her simplicity.

"If I care for Christianity," said Pallas, "and, mind you, it is only 'if,' because I'm sure the doctrines of Mahomet or Buddha are no less admirable—it is because it seems to contain more of those qualities that make for happiness and freedom than any other religion I know of. That's one of the things I should love to find out: all about foreign religions, and how they grew, and what good they do to people. I'm sure if you know what people worship, and what they believe, it's the best way of understanding them."

"Some day," he promised her, "I'll take you where people worship the sun! That's a grand religion, Pally! To stand up naked, and receive the strength of the sun, deep down in you—no wonder some of those savages are more like gods than men. I've been reading a lot of grandfather's books—

old books written by men who've travelled: I tell you, I shall never be content until we've escaped together from this little country where everything is so small and closed in, like a box. You'll come with me, won't you, Pally?"

"Of course I shall," she told him simply. "I love England, but I want to see the rest. What is it?" His hands had clutched her suddenly.

"Sometimes it seems too like a dream," he muttered. "Is it true, Pally, that you love me, and that we are going to spend the rest of our lives together?"

"God willing, it is true," she answered gravely.

"Why leave it to God? There is a chain of circumstance, forged by human action, for which, unless we're no better than puppets of destiny, we ourselves are responsible. If God's responsible for our present situation, all I can say is, He might have done better: for, if you are content, my love, let me assure you I'm far from being so!"

"Only be a little patient," she begged. "Papa's mind is surely changing, and I promise you he means nothing but good to both of us. Indeed, you've not yet had opportunity to prove how loving and considerate he can be, when once his heart is conquered, and although he says nothing, I feel his thoughts about you grow warmer every day."

"You don't think he's likely to go back on his word?"

"Papa? *Never*." A faint note of indignation sounded in the positive reply.

"Forgive me; I can't help . . . I must have you, Pallas: you know that, don't you? All of my future career—all of my life is bound up in you. If the verdict's against me, you know what it will mean: not only loss of the money, but the loss of my reputation—such as it is in these parts. Your father might think better of his promise—"

"Dear Matthew, you do not know Papa as I do," she told him gently. "Even though it might pain him terribly, he would never go back on his word."

"You know I should come and steal you away!"

"There would be no need to steal; I should come," she answered him.

They went into the house, to bid farewell to Lydia and Orabella, who, when farewells had been exchanged, accompanied Matthew again to the porch. The gardeners had been at work, and watered beds gave up their evening perfume of wallflower, candytuft and cherry pie. On the velvet grass Lydia's peacocks displayed their resplendent plumes, and Orabella's pet doves crooned from their white cote on its painted pole. He wondered if Pallas had ever considered what it would mean to leave all this rich, well-tended spaciousness—perhaps for some small, cramped villa in an acre or two of rough field?

The sweet, tender sky was fading from blue to primula, and far below, across the red roofs of the lower town, the silver loop of the river was scattered with miniature shipping, that looked like a child's toys. It was hard to picture war; harder to think of the sordid struggle beginning next day.

Lydia kissed him, and Orabella, having implanted a kiss of considerably more than sisterly fervour upon his cheek, was promptly removed by her mother, leaving the lovers together for their last farewells. Each sought escape in trivialities from the surge of their emotion.

"How shall you amuse yourself, Pally, while I am away?"

"There'll be all the usual things to do, in the house and out of it. And

oh—I've monstrously neglected all my poor people, with this new excitement about the war, and all our friends going away. Goodness knows what Amelia can be thinking of me; I haven't been near her for weeks."


"Cousin Amelia? What on earth have you and she in common?"

"I help her with the accounts," said Pallas solemnly, "and we do the collections together—you know: for the poor negroes that we mean to deliver from bondage."

"Well," said Matthew, with good-tempered masculine tolerance for feminine peccadilloes, "make the most of your liberty, sweetheart, for when you are Mistress Flood, I'll claim every moment for my own."

"You won't stop me working for my negroes?" she said anxiously.

He laughed, for it was no moment for argument; when they were married, it would be his business to fill her mind so full of other matters that this harmless craze was banished. Put a child in her arms, and he had no fears that Pallas would trouble her beautiful head about slaves. He drew her to him for the last embrace.



CHAPTER XIV

I

ASSIZE weeks meant gala to the little country town, which, for the nonce, revelled in pomp and pageantry, in crimson, gold and tassel, in the tremendous importance of bewigged plenipotentiaries, whose scattered largesse brought rejoicing to the hordes of beggars and tumbling urchins who followed the coaches each morning to the law courts.

Those were golden weeks to the keepers of inns, taverns and brothels; for wine and women there were none like the gentlemen of the law—who found the Gloucester wenches, with their fresh, countrified breath and skin of new milk, as succulent as ducklings after the stringy pullets of the Temple. Sagacious landladies reviewed their female staff, reorganized, and cheerfully assumed the responsibility of rousing a well-paying lodger from his sleeping sweetheart's side, in time to assume the wig and robe of the morning session: knowing that these and other complacencies would blossom later in new taffety gowns, in topknots and ribands that went far to appease the easy female conscience. Those who failed to secure one of the richer prizes were fain to make the best of the swarms of country attorneys, of clerks and law-writers who accompanied their principals: and these, it was generally muttered, were a niggardly lot, given to haggling over prices, to questioning the bill, and expecting everything for nothing; their hunched and narrow shoulders, threading the streets crowded with broad Gloucestershire men, made it appear as though a flock of seedy rooks had settled upon the town.

In the Judge's lodgings—a fine town property, laid at His Honour's disposal by its absentee owner—a riot of preparations had raged for the past month: such stocking of larders, spreading of fine linen and replenishment of cellars as was commensurate with the might and majesty of the law, which, in the person of His Honour Judge Pointevil, was reputed a tartar. A sour, contumacious fellow, very disagreeable with counsel: but a tiger for women! His mistress was known to accompany him to Assizes, and as it was said that his verdicts much depended upon the complacency of the lady, her favours were sought by all who had cases to be tried.

In fact, Matthew was told, when he arrived at the inn which, like every other in Gloucester, was filled to overflowing with people directly or indirectly connected with the great Flood lawsuit, that she was by no means the only member of her gay profession to accompany the legal cortège to the country: there was quite a little clutch of them, a cyprian nosegay, in this very hotel, where a special suite of apartments had been engaged, and some of London's prettiest lorettes were prepared to while away the tedium of gentlemen who, in their spare time, were not disposed for bucolic entertainment.

It was the first breath of London air that he had had since his bolt for the country, and it surprised him that the familiar odour roused so little response in his senses. He had gone, as Shergill directed him, to the most celebrated hostelry of the city, where he found himself cheek by jowl with several of

the bigwigs of the profession, and also—which amused him greatly—with some of the witnesses convened on Jason's behalf by the latter's legal advisors. These Judases of his unregenerate days evinced for the most part an exquisite discomfort on finding themselves *vis-à-vis* with their one-time companion, that tickled Matthew more than many an evening he had spent at the play. With Jason's money in their pockets, they were quite prepared to sell him to his enemies, but the situation was delicate. Several smart young rips sneaked out of the coffee-room when Matthew and Fordyce entered, having taken the journey easily, a little before noon. The "Flyer," bringing Shergill, Africa and the baggage, was not due for an hour. Jason, they heard, was skulking in cheap lodgings near the river; he was risking none of the fortune he had not yet secured, to provide himself with a little comfortable diversion through his painful ordeal.

The court had risen, and coffee-room, taproom and bar were crowded with customers who needed no curled horsehair wigs to proclaim their profession. Country attorneys were obsequious to their grander confrères, gentlemen in silk haughtily patronizing or jovially friendly, according to the status of their companions; here and there an anxious plaintiff or defendant gulped down needed stimulant, while the evidence played shove-ha'penny and jested with irresponsible indifference to the outcome of their day. There was plenty of money about; libations to the gods took the form of lavish hospitality, and many a pocket was cosy with bribes.

The ponderous figure of Shergill, when at last he arrived, took all eyes to the door; in his fine broadcloth coat, with satin small-clothes and scrupulously laundered linen, he waddled towards his waiting client, exchanging easy greetings on the way with high and low. Shergill might be a country attorney, but, unlike the majority of his seedy colleagues, he was a man of substance, a distinguished citizen and a prosperous shipowner, which put him on a different level from his equals in the profession.

"Have ye seen Buckle? Where the devil's Buckle?" From a crowd of men in horsehair wigs and robes he detached with a crooked forefinger a heavy, somewhat pompous fellow, who, at first sight, did not impress Matthew as his future advocate. They exchanged some stiff courtesies, and Buckle invited them to dine with him in a private room: after which Shergill announced he was going to take a nap. "Me flesh and bones are curdled after that plaguy ride! I'll see you later."

Matthew and Fordyce went up to see that Africa was unpacking the baggage; the black man's appearance had caused a great sensation at the inn, and much contributed to his master's status with the staff.

"Egad, there's a fine piece!" said Fordyce, who was standing at the window.

A very smart little equipage had driven into the market square, the colour of its bright blue and yellow paintwork repeated in the horses' harness—as metropolitan a picture as any presented on a summer's Sunday in the park of St. James. A minute groom, from his perch behind, supported a parasol over the head of the chariot's occupant: a bold-lipped, sullen-eyed siren, contemptuous of her rustic surroundings, her voluptuous bosom's over-ripeness barely restrained by the corsage from which she had thrust back its gauzy coquetterie of embroidered fichu—she lolled on the cushions like a disgruntled

Cleopatra, with bare arms loaded to the elbow with a variety of undoubtedly authentic jewellery.

"I wonder who's the owner of that fine piece of property!" grinned Fordyce, who took the delight of many men of sluggish physical reactions and small powers of attracting the other sex in posing as a dog with the ladies.

"Great gods!" said Matthew, as a toss of the plumed bonnet revealed to him a profile monstrosously familiar, though maturer than the last time he had seen it. "It's Fanny Trine. What in the name of conscience brings her to these parts? It's easier to picture a humming-bird alighting on an iceberg, than the arched instep of Fanny on these rustic pavements!"

"You know the young lady?" said Fordyce enviously.

"It's a good four years since I set eyes on her, for she turned me and half a dozen others down to place herself under the protection of an elderly lover, who didn't encourage her in the pursuit of former friendships," said Matthew carelessly.

"And who was the lucky conqueror of those charms?" inquired Fordyce, licking his lips with a provincial's relish of these revelations of city life. Matthew threw him a glance of contempt, for the charms, to him, were stale indeed, and he could not imagine a man of taste now surrendering to them.

"I never troubled to inquire; Fanny was never anything but a whim of mine; I was a deal more taken up with her little friend, Harriot Bland, who was less avaricious than Fanny, and more considerate of the limitations of my purse."

"It should be easy enough to pick up the pretty acquaintance," insinuated Fordyce, obviously agog to come to closer terms with this jaded Phryne. "No doubt she's got friends among this sparrow's nest"—he jerked his head towards the floor above, where the London ladies were said to be lodged—"and I'll wager we can find an entry, sooner or later."

Matthew shrugged the suggestion aside; no doubt, when he felt in the mood, he would sample the means of entertainment so conveniently to hand, but he had no present urge towards it: was not to be driven, at any rate, against his will, for the sake of satisfying the sneaking little curiosity of a country doctor.

Under the influence of wine, their host at dinner developed a more genial personality than he had presented at the moment of introduction. He spoke frankly of the chances of the morrow.

"'Tis a pity we're up before Pointevil, for a more unreliable, detestable fellow doesn't sit on the judges' bench," he admitted. "It's the first time he's been on this circuit, that used to be Beldon's"—Buckle and Shergill interchanged winks that roused the curiosity of Matthew—"and they say he's shown his colours already! They say a crippled body always houses a crippled soul——"

"He's lame?" put in Matthew.

"You haven't his acquaintance, sir?" Buckle raised his eyebrows, as though finding it astonishing that any person should not know the bench of judges. "A little hunchbacked fellow, vain as a peacock and sour as a lemon, that came to his robes by favour and the virtue of being connected with the peerage: though that don't affect his knowledge of jurisprudence, that one would

think of more highly if he chose more often to exert it." Buckle, thought Matthew, had drunk beyond the point of discretion; it could not be often that counsel permitted this freedom of speech in connection with the heads of their profession.

"A man of prejudice." Shergill wagged his head and drew in his pale, fleshy lips.

"Let me not mislead you, sir. I've followed many of Pointevil's summings up, besides defending before him, and I make no criticisms on his findings. At the same time," said Buckle, with a return to his former pomposity, "it is no more than fair to warn my client of certain tricks that persons who are unprepared find very disconcertin'. Pointevil's a devil with a witness; he don't give a rap for the evidence, if there's a chance of displayin' his wit before the jury—that rarely has a chance of knowing what the case is about until it's time for the summing up. He usually manages, before the case is over, to make a butt of some particular person—it may be witness, it may be plaintiff, it has been, on occasion"—Buckle twisted his heavy face into a wry smile—"your humble servant: yet it's a known caprice of his to give judgment in favour of a claimant who's been, from beginning to end, the butt of his most unpleasant humour."

"You at least draw the picture of a comedian, sir," said Matthew, smiling.

"It depends upon your taste for comedy. I like mine sweetened," was the dry response. With a finger laid to the side of a fleshy nose, Buckle leaned forward, to add on a lower note, "And there's a factor, as no doubt my friend and colleague here has heard, that influences in no little measure His Lordship's humour. A very potent factor——" he paused.

Matthew, leaning back in his chair, spoilt the effect of mystery the other was evidently bent on creating, by casually interpolating:

"Fanny Trine." It suddenly came to him, as the explanation of the figure he had seen in the market place.

"Ha, ha! I see you are better informed than I had thought, sir"—again Buckle and Shergill exchanged glances, and the latter nodded once, slowly, as though something had satisfied him.

"I gathered it—when I saw Fanny this afternoon in the market place," said Matthew.

"You are perhaps acquainted with the lady?" There was unmistakable eagerness in the barrister's tone, his eyes, fixed on Matthew's, hardened and brightened suddenly, like green marbles, between their ruddy, hairless lids.

"I knew her—some years ago," admitted Matthew.

"An acquaintanceship that may prove of the greatest value to our case," said Buckle, throwing himself back with an air of triumph. "My dear sir!" he beamed at Shergill—"we are in luck indeed. I hadn't anticipated such a powerful asset—I take it, sir, that your terms with the lady were those of—friendship?" There was a note of anxiety in the question that brought a smile to Matthew's lips—Miss Trine being no less famous for her dislikes than for her affections.

"There was a short period," he said, laughing, "when I had the entrée to her box at the opera and enjoyed the privilege of her hospitality in Duke Street: a period that came naturally to an end with the rearrangement of her ménage—presumably coincident with her meeting with His Honour."

"Excellent!" cried Buckle heartily. "We can have no better card up our sleeve, if His Honour's 'comedy'"—his lips pursed into a ludicrously arch pout, as he acknowledged the origin of the term—"gets out of hand."

A card, Matthew hoped, that he would not have to produce, save in emergency. He had no desire to revive the relationship with Fanny.

Their host, having by now apparently taken stock of his company, slyly produced a note, which he said had been sent him that afternoon, inviting the gentlemen to accept a little entertainment, after they had dined.

"We might have had 'em down to dine with us; but, not knowing the pretty creatures, nor the tastes of you gentlemen, I thought it more prudent to see the lie of the land before committing ourselves!"

So they went upstairs—to find that they were far from being the only guests; a large, private sitting-room was crowded, the pretty hostesses lavish of their favours, and one of them—there were four—being a fair performer on the spinet, a waltz was started, which caused much rivalry and laughter, as the number of partners far exceeded the ladies, who fluttered from one to another, sparing no effort to please and charm the person whom they favoured for the moment—which was strictly controlled by Shergill, who, watch in hand, prepared to settle disputes about the amount of time accorded to each partner.

But Fanny Trine was not there—nor had he expected her to be. Her name was not spoken, and the doctor, with a pink-faced messalina on one knee and his own face empurpled with the joys of a new experience, evidently found a bird in the hand as good as one on the bough. At midnight they were still drinking wine, the hotel servants had mounted a repast of which all partook in *al fresco* fashion, and, although legal topics were tacitly barred, Matthew drank to many a pair of bright eyes, in which he saw mirrored good wishes to his venture. It amused him at one point to find himself propping a console with one of those fickle friends who, to-morrow, would be witnessing against him in the court; it pleased him to greet this person with every appearance of goodwill: to pin him down with pressing queries about his present fortunes, which, owing to the crowding of the room, the miserable was quite unable to avoid, and had therefore to respond to with the sickly smiles and over-suavity of a guilty conscience.

But when he retired, it was not of the pretty cyprians, nor even of his enemies, that Matthew thought; with elbows propped on the windowsill, he gazed at the moon, now shining over Bristol: over Pallas, whose nosegay of a rose and a sprig of rosemary, tossed from her window as he rode past, was in his breast pocket: over the *Cassiopeia*, waiting in Seamill for her word to depart. The lovely ship, silent and drenched in moonlight; her holds filled with trading stuffs; her guns mounted; cabins in readiness for the passengers of the West African Company, returning to, or visiting for the first time the forts of the Slave and Ivory coasts. He had many a time envied them. The lovely ship, that would surely be gone before his return—he saw the magic lifting of the shrouds, each masthead veil itself in the spreading canvas, saw the vast, triumphant figurehead thrusting towards the sea . . . one day he would call a ship *Pallas*, and she should bear under her bows the likeness of his lady.

How life had changed. It seemed that in making contact with dreams he had, for the first time, made contact with reality.

II

The case opened badly, for it was evident, on the first morning, that Jason's counsel, Rickaby, was a much more potent pleader than Buckle, who disconcerted his client by a halting and heavy delivery which the latter ascribed, perhaps not unjustly, to his diversions of the previous night. He seemed half-stupefied when he rose to propound the defendant's case, and when the judge, who was living up to his reputation by arriving in a towering rage, nearly an hour late for the opening of the court, picked him up sharply on a trivial point of precedence, Buckle was for some seconds hopelessly nonplussed, and concluded his speech in so blunt and clumsy a fashion that young solicitors winked at each other, and Rickaby and his second exchanged overt sneers of amusement.

It was very hot, and the court stank like a cesspool, in spite of the assiduity of ushers, who burnt shovelfuls of herbs and vinegar at intervals to freshen the atmosphere; bluebottles bumbled on the windowpanes and the crumpled scarlet figure of the judge resembled that of some malignant dwarf, brooding upon the scene. Even Rickaby was jumpy, for it was evidently going to be one of Pointevill's bad days; there was a lot of snuff-taking, and the proceedings were constantly interrupted by bursts of sneezing, and by disorderly surgings about the doors, where the excluded public waited its opportunity to dodge in as others came out. There was not room in the galleries to thrust a pin; the ladies from the hotel had been accommodated, through the influence of their legal acquaintances, and, fluttering fans and smelling salts, followed with a constant sibilance of whispers the dull preliminaries of the suit. To-morrow they would be bored, and would stay in bed until noon; but this morning, drawn by the romantic figure of the young defendant, they were there in full strength—not a little to the annoyance of their local rivals, who had failed to secure their privileges of entrance.

To the eyes of the observers, the protagonists must have presented a piquant contrast: Matthew, sombre, yet debonair, an elegant and commanding figure, easy in bearing, affecting an amused tolerance of proceedings which, one might have gathered, affected him little: it was an admirable façade. From time to time he raised a handkerchief, drenched in perfume, to his offended nostrils: a gesture which, as the perfection of foppery, evoked murmurs of admiration from the ladies in the gallery. On the opposite side of the court sat Jason—like a death's head; from beginning to end of the morning session, his position never varied: hands clasped on the handle of the stick he held between his knees, his eyes were closed during most of the time; the skin of his face was grey, like powder, but, as the heat increased, a sickly film appeared on brow and staring cheekbones. In the last six months Jason had become an old man; he looked many years older than his father, at the time of the latter's death, and many, remarking his drab, economical outfit—what need had a Flood for economy—and contrasting it with the

resplendent style of his nephew, wondered what use such a man could find for the immense fortune he was disputing.

Matthew attacked Shergill furiously during the interval, for having secured him a numskull as advocate, but Shergill, knowing his man, took the matter calmly, while admitting that things looked none too bright, and that His Honour had shown more consideration than had been anticipated for Jason's side of the case.

"Wait till Buckle starts on their witnesses; he ain't much as a pleader, but in cross-examination he's the devil incarnate! He'll raise bedlam, with every man contradicting himself and the others."

No witnesses, however, were called that day, and the whole of the following morning was taken up by an acrimonious dispute between counsel; tables were laden with calf-bound volumes, long extracts from cases of the last century were recited in snuffling legal sing-song, and the court rapidly emptied of all save the interested parties. Just before the court rose to dine, the first of Jason's witnesses went into the box: a solemn member of the Bristol "meeting," he testified to the good relations between Jason and his father, and to the latter's frequently expressed intention of rewarding his son's integrity. He was one of the witnesses to the will of 1753. Buckle did not trouble to cross-examine; he was reserving his thunders for the motley crew that waited their call on the morrow.

During the next fortnight, every sort of relevant and irrelevant evidence was examined and cross-examined. There was no doubt the legal profession meant to make a party of it; "Flood v. Flood" was too succulent a morsel to be relinquished until the last gilded shred had been licked from the carcass. Matthew, sick for Pallas, impatient always, swore like a trooper in the privacy of his rooms.

"God in heaven! Does this go on for ever?"

Shergill, biting his nails, mumbled that the time had come to look up Fanny Trine.

"You saw the way Fordyce got handled? We've got all the evidence, but we ain't getting fair play; there's not been a single one of our objections that's been upheld—though Rickaby got enough license, when Buckle trod on the corns of one of his witnesses. It looks as if somebody's loading the dice against us—for a babe 'ud tell you Jason's case is pure chimera. What's more, Rickaby knows it, if Jason don't, and he's driving the evidence like a coach an' four along the edge of a precipice, halting every dozen yards to make sure the traces hold! Pointevil don't give a rap for the case—he's bored with it already, and, if we don't take care, this 'ull go to the High Courts, and your grandchildren may profit, but you never will!"

"There's no way of forcing a verdict?"

Shergill looked at him, with pity for Matthew's *naïveté*. Then he said slowly:

"They were saying in the coffee-room last night that Pointevil ain't thinking of a verdict. You marked him, through yesterday's evidence, scribbling as if there was the devil in the tips of his pen? Then there was the business with sealing-wax, and a fellow dispatched—I'll lay a fiver 'twas to Fanny's lodgings. Then the coach came, and there was the devil to pay, when His Lordship saw it was empty! Miss Fanny's at her tricks, and we may have to pay for 'em."

Matthew thought it was no matter for surprise, if the high-spirited Fanny found her position irksome at times, and, at first pooh-poohed the effects of her humours on the Court. Under its folds of flesh, Shergill's jaw stiffened with opposition.

"There's no accounting for a man's behaviour, when he's insane with jealousy. If you take my advice, you'll see Miss Fanny, and persuade her, for the sake of old friendship, to show a little amenity to her lover—at least till the case is over! Let me tell you this, my boy: it's she that, directly or indirectly, has controlled Pointevil's verdicts in every case of importance that's come before him, since they set up house together. Let Miss Fanny smile, and he's a very sucking dove, a very Solomon of legislation! But when she frowns, justice itself lets drop the scales, and chaos ain't the word for subsequent proceedings!"

Six months ago, Matthew would not have had the smallest scruple in picking up the threads of his acquaintanceship with Fanny Trine; his present hesitation was in part due to the thought of Pallas, who so governed all of his mind and heart that he doubted he had the power of making himself agreeable to another woman, and partly to the fact that Fanny and her circle represented a phase of existence he urgently desired to forget. It was astonishing how distasteful that existence had come to appear to him, in retrospect: a jiggling of puppets, one petty intrigue following on another—not a *man's* life, in the sense that the future he was now planning was a man's life. Still if Fanny were the only means whereby he could secure a fair hearing for his case. . . .

"Where is she?" he muttered.

"Easy enough to find out. And harkee: I'm told on good authority that it's useless to approach Miss Fanny empty-handed. A jewel's a more practical preliminary to conversations than any number of *billets doux*, where she's concerned!"

"I need no reminders of Fanny's tastes," said Matthew dryly; "though where in Gloucester I'm to find the means of gratifying them——?"

"Walk into the town with me, and I'll show you. I have a letter that must go by the coach, for Peddy writes me they can't get the ship away; the lading's held up on account of the ships o' war that's taking all the labour—plague on 'em!" grunted Shergill, as leaning heavily on his stick and on Matthew's arm he limped out into the sun.

III

While his nephew cultivated the society of the lady on whom so much depended, Jason chafed in and out of the courts, deploring the wastage of time, the neglect of his business in Bristol, and, most of all, the guineas which, as day followed day, sifted into the pockets of the law. Had Ann been right after all? He had a letter from her, all Biblical texts, doleful predictions and reminders of the dangers of "foreign lodgings"—of which, her thin scrawl hinted, livestock and damp covers were the least to be apprehended! Had he his pistols always at hand—his chamber door fortified with a proper lock? She prayed he might be spared all temptations—a prayer which was answered, for the one blessing of Jason's exile, had he been in the humour to perceive it, was

his solitary couch. No whimpering in the dark, no sordid mask of tragedy rising horrid by candlelight above his pillow! He did not miss these things, but it did not occur to him to give thanks for their absence. Instead, he lay awake, wondering what tricks his clerks were playing with the ledgers, to what extent his workmen were cheating him, what losses he would have to face on his return—for, like most people who refuse to deputize the least detail to trustworthy subordinates, he was not to be persuaded that his affairs were not going to rack and ruin during his absence.

Meanwhile, his advisers assured him, the case was going "very nicely" on the whole; there was evidently prejudice in their favour.

"With all the town cheering that scoundrel as he left the court this afternoon?" asked Jason bitterly.

Matthew had, in fact, received an ovation; his handsome, confident figure had captured public imagination, and the superstition of obtaining benefice from the jealous gods by lavish almsgiving was implanted in his gambler's spirit. He spent boldly, and damned the future: a spirit people are quick to applaud—and exploit. Since coming to Gloucester, Jason had not given a farthing away; Clay regretted it, but it was a point too delicate to be mooted with his client.

So, when Matthew passed along the streets, many a pair of eyes beamed soft encouragement into his, and the hearty hands of countrymen clapped him on the shoulder, with "Good luck to 'ee, lad." It was not all bought favour; Gloucester folk liked a bold, upstanding young fellow, who returned jest for jest and kept a stiff upper lip when things seemed to be running against him; for it was said Pointevil had given him a roasting the other day in the box—and there was certainly a lot of malice flying about.

"Let the town do as it pleases; it has nothing to do with the verdict," Clay pointed out, with prim regard for the dignity of the law. "Any person can buy popularity with a gallon of beer!" It was the nearest he came to reminding his client that a little generosity was not out of place. He had heard plenty of chatter about the royal way in which, each night, Matthew entertained his advisers to dinner; Jason sneaked home, to cold meats and beer in his lodgings. That sort of thing was a test of loyalty; it was, at least, a regrettable departure from tradition. The memory of Hercules' hospitalities were frequently in Clay's mind that week, when he dined, modestly but well, in the privacy of his own rooms.

"Is it going to the High Court? Is it going to the High Court?" Jason agonized, as the days went by. Clay would not commit himself; he had warned his client at the beginning that, if left to the gentlemen of the law, it would almost certainly go to the High Court—which might mean a lifetime of legislation and small profits—if any—to be gained in the end. But, stubborn in his intention, Jason had rejected the warning: now it tormented him night and day, for there was only a fortnight more to run of Assizes, and they seemed as far as ever from settlement.

Miss Fanny Trine, chin sunk on dimpled shoulder, black eyes dispatched "killing" glances at her visitor, who found that poor Fanny had grown sadly blowsy during her years of apparent affluence.

"I'm sure it's vastly kind of me to receive you at all, when you've neglected me for so many years!"

"You were always known to be the soul of kindness, Fanny," he answered—not without irony: for Fanny was known to be as malicious as an elephant, and to avenge a real or fancied slight long after the person responsible had forgotten its occurrence.

"You waited long enough, before proving it," she retorted, with a gathering of her thick black brows. She had grown vulgar, he decided, with her upper arms thick as a fishwife's and almost double chin. Ah, Pallas, if she knew, need not be jealous; the notion of laying a finger on Fanny, in her present overblown and overcoloured edition, was so repellent to him that he with difficulty repressed a grimace. Unfortunately, it was apparent that her sentiments on his behalf were not of like nature: her eyelids were heavy with invitation; extended on her couch, she displayed to their fullest advantages those charms of rounded hip and plump instep he had once—might heaven forgive him!—found seductive. Still, in those days she was thinner, he excused himself: a plumpish sylph with some devil in her. The devil, now, had grown old and importunate.

"I only considered your convenience, Fanny"—he managed to force a note of reproach into his tone. "Amid the charms of a new environment, who was I to assume that my presence would be agreeable?"

"You never thought how lonely I would be!" Tears—the famous "crocodile tears" of Fanny; how well he remembered them—hung on the stiffened rays of black from which, as he well knew, they would never be allowed to fall. She flicked them away with a handkerchief of lace. "All my friends gone—Harriot dead: you know she died in childbed to that odious Colonel she was so set upon? and nothing to do all day long but mope in my room——"

"Your rooms, dear Fanny!" he corrected. "And don't forget the retinue of domestics, the cupboards full of gowns—not to speak of the elegant turnout I admired a few days ago in the town! You have done admirably for yourself, and it gives me all the pleasure in the world to felicitate you on your fortune. I wish my own were as well assured!"

She pouted and scowled at him.

"You might at least have called, with your congratulations, a fortnight ago."

"Now that I have called, need we spoil the happy event with recriminations?" said Matthew, a little more sharply than he intended.

The old Fanny, he knew, would have cursed him up hill and down dale; but here was a woman conscious her charms were on the wane, and less certain than in the old days of her power to conquer. She might still play her tantrums on the lover she was sure of, but it was not the way to revive an old passion. She remembered him very well, as a swaggering blade with empty pockets, that she had entertained sometimes for the sake of his good looks and the appeal they made to her senses; and she was astute enough to recognize that the man before her was not the lath-and-plaster hero of a night's "affair," but a man of character and determination, physically the most thrilling creature she had met for years! Yes, Fanny had sacrificed much to the security of a settled existence, and there were days when, thinking of her old protector, she felt as though she would go mad, cut his throat or her own, then throw herself into the river, rather than continue to endure his senile embraces. Yet always prudence had prevailed; especially when she

looked in the glass, and realized how much less her chances now were of securing the lover her imagination often conjured.

"I was hurt you hadn't been near me before." She had been furious, and, as usual, had vented her fury on her protector. Yes, Pointevil was sick with jealousy—the fool! As though she'd be likely to find a lover among these yokels! Now, unless he was careful, he should have something to be jealous about. But they would have to take great care. Clutching Matthew's hand, her eyes became glassy with speculation, while the thoughts raced behind that low, sensual brow.

Supposing that she were able to make him love her again—and Pointevil gave him the verdict! Hope strained in her bosom. Within the next half-hour Matthew heard all the horrors of living with a man "old enough to be my father" (the description was only a trifle exaggerated)—"and so repulsive that I could be sick each time I hear his foot on the stair!" Miss Fanny spared him no particulars; Matthew reflected, perhaps for the first time in his life, that men had, indeed, the better part in existence.

"You'll come and see me again?" She clung to him as he was going. "The woman who keeps this house is to be trusted, and I'm always by myself until ten or so."

Matthew hesitated; it seemed a very risky proceeding. Nor did he care for the price he was evidently expected to pay for Miss Fanny's complaisance to her protector. In Gloucester his figure was marked, and the house where Fanny lodged was in the very centre of the town, within a stone's throw of the judge's residence—which, in fact, as Matthew was later to find out, communicated with it very conveniently by means of an orchard, a fact which was probably taken into account, before settling the lady's domicile. Nothing could be more fatal to his case than rousing Pointevil's jealousy, apparently as ready as tinder for a light.

Nor did it escape Matthew's consideration that news of this imbroglio might easily come to Pallas's ears. In summer-time, with the regular service of coaches, not to mention private citizens, who rode or drove over, and were bound to carry local gossip back with them, the affairs of Gloucester were almost as closely linked with Bristol as those of its near neighbour, Bath; and, naturally, all Bristol was agog with the Flood lawsuit. The notion that Pallas might think he had been false to her drove Matthew nearly mad; was there an hour of the day or night when she was not in his thoughts, sweet governess of all his actions?

Shergill's last words, however, rang in his ears:

"Win Fanny, and you've won your case."


He gave his word to visit her, on the following evening, and left fate to provide some means of avoiding the breaking of his faith with Pallas. Like many men in his position, he did not allow sufficiently for the ruthless passion of a woman who, knowing summer is passing into autumn, snatches each rose, before it withers on the bough.

Meanwhile, he and his supporters reaped the first-fruits of the harvest on the following morning, when eyebrows were raised and surreptitious grins exchanged among the sapient, at the unexpected blandness of Mr. Justice Pointevil. That His Honour was in good humour appeared from the moment of his arrival in court; within half an hour, it was made apparent that his

mind was wholly upon the matter in hand, and Rickaby's side was obviously shaken: for Pointevil was one of those judges given to asking inconvenient questions, and his formidable memory reduced to pulp counsel who were obliged always to verify their statements by reference to recorded evidence. With Pointevil on the mark, the proceedings gathered impetus. "No need to look that up, sir; in *Rex v. Hampton*, 1752, you will find established——"

Counsel and attorney looked at him reproachfully; it seemed as though, despite their efforts, a verdict was imminent. On the third day of this new order of things, His Honour gave himself the trouble of instructing the jury at length, upon a somewhat involved question that Rickaby had introduced, in obvious hopes of calling a temporary halt to proceedings; his instruction made hay of three hours of evidence. Rickaby flounced back in his seat; the coach was perilously near the edge of the precipice. Jason was the colour of lead; Matthew and his side were grinning. Let 'em grin, thought Rickaby viciously: you never knew how the cat was going to jump, with Pointevil on the bench.

But there were nudges in the galleries, and heads that craned over to look—not at His Honour—but at the gay defendant. Matthew saw them, and the smile faded from his lips. He scowled: for his pockets were far too full of the passionate missives of Miss Fanny Trine.



CHAPTER XV

I

"WILL the wars *never* be over?"

Life, to quote Orabella, was about as gay as a graveyard, with Pally, bless her, but a poor companion, her heart and mind away across the Gloucester hills. The girls had been asked to join their cousins, who had been ordered, for the health of the youngest, to seaside lodgings; but what thrill could there be in such *al fresco* diversions, with no gentlemen at hand to quiz a neat ankle, to dote on a tress of loosened hair?

There was nothing for it but to make up the quarrel with Clara Peddy, whose lively fount of gossip was the sole source of amusement to be found in the neighbourhood.

Clara, the least resentful person in the world, was ready enough to resume relations with her dear Orabella, and the two compared war-time romances with the diligence of philatelists, examining each one for marks of authenticity and rejecting those that seemed, to the experienced eyes of Clara, mere counterfeit. Clara had three years' advantage of Orabella, and had been twice betrothed: on her fourteenth birthday to an old friend of her father's who, fortunately for the light-hearted girl, had given up the ghost before the time came for him to claim his bride; and a year or two later to a sea captain who perished in a tempest off the Cape of Good Hope. As her sentiments had not, in either instance, been in the least involved, Miss Clara was quite undaunted: swearing in secret to Orabella that she meant to have the last word next time, and that neither Papa nor Mama should chase her into marriage against the dictates of her own heart.

As final proof of reconciliation, Orabella had shown her the valentine from "E," and nothing could have been more gratifying than Clara's admiration, her quite frank envy and her thrilled conjectures as to who "E" might be.

"Oh, I'm so glad we are friends again," impulsively declared Orabella, after one of these orgies of confidence, "for Pally spends the whole of her time writing to Matthew—" She caught her lip in her teeth, too late, for Clara's eye glittered with triumph.

"Now, Orry, ain't it true those two are betrothed? I've always said so to Mama, but she wouldn't have it."

"For mercy's sake, don't say I told you: for 'tisn't a real betrothal—" Now the murder was out, Orabella gasped with relief. "You know Papa is all against it—though he did give evidence on Matthew's side—and there's not a word to be said until the case is over."

"Which doesn't surprise me!—for all these revelations of Matthew's past 'ud be terrible embarrassing for Pally, if he and she were known to be betrothed! La, to be sure! It's taken for granted men lead different lives from us poor, shut-up females, but I wouldn't have believed——! Oh, no, I couldn't repeat such things, even to you; but I happened to overhear Papa telling Mama, and I declare I'd have passed away in a swoon if I'd had to

listen to them in court," declared Miss Clara virtuously. "All the same, I wish we were in Gloucester. It's sickening dull at home, with Papa so glum, and nothing but ships, ships, ships from morning to night. After all, the merchant ships can't be as important as the ships of war, which have to be got away or the French might be landing at any minute. I wish they would!—for they say Frenchmen are very gallant with the ladies."

"I'd like to get on a ship to-morrow," yawned Orabella, "and sail—and sail—anywhere where there was something to do, and something to break this shocking monotony."

"I think there's very little that's agreeable about ocean travel!" The speaker tossed her head with the superiority of experience. "I've been on board many of Papa's ships, and the cabins are like handboxes and there isn't room for a thing. All the same—that's an idea! Suppose Mama should get us leave to visit the *Cassiopæia*? It's the biggest ship we've got in port, and if you've never seen over a sea-going vessel, you'll find it most amusing."

Orabella was enchanted with the idea, and ran instantly to find Pallas and ask if she would join the expedition; but Pallas had gone with Betty to confide her letter to Matthew to Betty's friend, the driver of the Gloucester coach: a useful means of avoiding the exorbitant rates of postage and the dilatory methods of the postal service. So Clara was dispatched home, with exhortations to lose no time in arranging the entertainment, and in advising her devoted Orabella the day and the hour it was to take place.

"But, Orry, the *Cassiopæia* is a slave trader!" Pallas recoiled when the proposal was put to her.

"You don't suppose her holds are packed with niggers, do you?" scoffed Orabella. "Clara says it's most amusin', and we'll dine in the captain's cabin! It's an experience I've always longed for—and I'm sure there's little enough fun for you not to turn up your nose at so uncommon an outing!"

Pallas sat thinking. Her whole being shrank from treading those boards which reeked of suffering, as her moral sense shrank from appearing, by her presence, to lend approbation to an enterprise she loathed. What on earth would Amelia say?—Amelia who, in a fit of compunction for past neglect, she had invited to take tea with her the other day, and who had spent the greater part of her visit in bewailing the apathy of "brethren" who, with their heads full of the war, seemed for the time wholly to have forgotten the plight of their black brethren.

"The contributions have fallen off shocking," bemoaned Amelia, who, with darts in the tips of her cotton gloves and limp, threadbare ribbons, seemed with her mournful glances to reproach her hostess with the crisp elegance of the embroidered India muslin Pallas had put on to receive her guest. "If half the price of those embroideries had gone to the cause——!" her half-sorrowful, half-critical glance seemed to say.

The two girls gravely discussed means whereby enthusiasm might be revived.

"Papa's absence is, no doubt, a grave element in the falling off of interest; for poor Mama, in her terrible anxiety, is quite unfit to take her usual part in the meetings, and I," said poor Amelia humbly, "have no gift for public affairs."

"You must all be terribly anxious, Amelia," put in Pallas, thinking how

strange it was that this girl, with whom she had nothing in common save their mutual interest in the abolition of the slave trade, should be so closely united with her in the painful stress of current events. "If your father wins the case, it must make a great difference to your lives. (And to mine? And to mine?)" She crushed back the unspoken thought.

"Why so?" In its stiff, unnatural control, Amelia's face so resembled her mother's that it was as though Ann sat there. "It is well known that much of Grandfather's fortune came from the unholy trade we are vowed to suppress, and Papa's first act will be to render those ill-gotten gains to the service of the wretched souls whose tortures they represent. What he will do with the rest is Papa's affair, but it cannot affect the lives of me and my mother and sister in any way. We are not brought up to frivolities, nor to the gratification of our fleshly lusts——" This time the glance of animosity was apparent. Pallas thought: Poor creatures! How dreadful it must be, to spend the whole of one's life in a denial of human nature.

"I'll do all I possibly can to help you, Amelia," she promised, when her visitor rose to depart. Amelia held out a limp hand.

"I know that in a worldly life there are many temptations to forget one's duties to unfortunate fellow-creatures," she said, so exactly in her mother's whining voice that Pallas's lips twitched. "I hope you will be steadfast, Pallas. You have so many opportunities that are not given to us all."

It now struck Pallas that, if she were actually to pay a visit to a slave ship, and could describe what she had seen at one of the meetings, it might have a great effect upon the sluggish sympathies of the members. She had never spoken in public, and was terrified at the prospect, but it seemed to her a duty she would have to perform in the best way she could, and trust to providence to see her through.

The position was a little delicate; as the Peddys were close friends of her family, it would be impossible to specify the source of her information; but, on thinking it over, there seemed no reason why she should bring their name, or the name of John Peddy's ship, into it. The description of one slaver would surely serve for all. It was with this object in her mind that she agreed to take part in the expedition.

Mrs. Peddy, always ready for jollifications, at once fell in with her daughter's suggestion, and set about coaxing her husband, who, for the sake of peace, gave way to the whim of his womenkind. The *Cassiopeia* lay there idle, and beyond warning Abiathar, and exhorting him to have things spruce and shipshape for the feminine invasion, John Peddy took no further interest in the matter. He had sufficient to worry about in the labour troubles that prevented him from getting his ships away. Mrs. Peddy distributed invitations left and right, and on a bright and shining morning of late June, a fluttering bevy of beauty appeared on the quayside.

Lydia Burmester was there, to chaperone her daughters—Miss Orry very pink and Miss Pally very pale, but smart, the pair of them, as though going to a Buckingham House reception. There were Clara and her mother, and Miss Totty Shergill, who, as daughter of an owner, had to be included in the invitation. As escort had to be found for this galaxy of youth and charm—to which, at the last moment, Miss Susan Culpeper added herself, having secured as cavalier the red-haired Gannet stepson, almost the only young man

of social standing left in Bristol, since he was disabled by asthma from service in Army or Navy—Mrs. Peddy had pressed her husband to be present, and the sturdy John, dismayed at the prospect of being the only male in this feminine gathering, brought along the Cruikshank brothers with their respective wives.

The cavalcade crossed the gang plank—accepting, with delicious tremors, the assistance of brawny hands, and exclaiming upon the novelty of all about them: the scent of tar and brine, the freshly scrubbed decks—Abiathar had had her scoured like a man-o'-war—and the imponderable intricacies of the rigging that soared above them. The captain received his guests on the quarterdeck, with his magnificence fluttering the hearts of all the ladies, who exclaimed *sotto voce* upon his “romantic” appearance, and on that of the young black boy (alas for the translation of Lady Gannet’s pet!) who followed everywhere upon his master’s heels. The very surliness of Abiathar’s manner (like all shipmasters, he hated his ship being made a peepshow), and the bare politeness he showed to his visitors, only added to his devastating charm in the eyes of Miss Totty Shergill, whose grisly assumptions of coquetry, it is to be feared, reduced the none too well-bred Miss Culpeper to giggling spasms and made the rest of her friends blush for her. Even Orabella was sufficiently overcome to whisper, “Pally, ain’t he marvellous? I vow I could lose my heart completely to a man like that,” as they went on their conducted tour over all the “public” parts of the ship. They were shown the passengers’ mess and cabins—“Ain’t they delightful? Like dear little painted bandboxes, and I vow it ‘ud thrill me to sleep in one of those queer shelves: like going to bed in a chest of drawers!”—the chart room and the captain’s quarters; they peeped, with squeaks of delicious terror, down hatches, shivering in the dark, unfathomable depths revealed. “Oh, Captain Crown! Don’t tell me there are *rats* down there!”

“Hundreds and thousands of ‘em, Miss Peddy,” averred Abiathar, who had his orders not to escort the company below.

“Catch me, somebody; I shall swoon,” declared Miss Clara, with a glance around to see if there was any attendant sailor attractive enough to warrant such a display of feminine weakness. Deciding that, of the impassive seamen who stood around, none was likely to reward the surrender, she recovered herself rapidly.

“Now, pray, let us see the kitchens!” Mrs. Peddy was beaming, with housewifely interest in the conduct of culinary matters. They trooped to the galley, miraculously clean, filled with appetizing odours of the repast presently to be offered to the captain’s guests. The elder ladies lost themselves in the pleasure of lifting saucepan lids, cried praises upon the spotlessness of the appointments, declared that ocean travel, in these days, was no less luxurious than living at home—and suffered themselves to be shepherded back to the captain’s cabin, where refreshment awaited them.

“Good gracious me, Pally!” observed Orabella, a glass between her fingers, her eyes dancing with the novelty of the entertainment. “You must be mad—you and Amelia Flood—with all your stories of how badly the slaves are treated! From all we’ve seen, the creatures are positively cosseted!”

The beautiful, calm eyes of Pallas, shaded by the brim of her Leghorn straw, with its sweeping maroon ostrich plume, dwelt on her sister’s, as though in

pity for such superficiality. Her hand, though gloved, had shrunk from the hearty grip of Abiathar's palm, as her eyes had winced before his stare of evident recognition and admiration. Why she should be recognized by a slaver captain she had not the slightest idea; accustomed as she was to men's gallantries, she had been haunted, and a little oppressed, by the amount of attention he contrived to pay her, which, in Pallas's opinion, might more gracefully have been shown to the wife of his owner, or to one of the Cruikshank ladies, who appeared to have enjoyed his former acquaintance. Totty Shergill, hideous in saffron-yellow checked gingham, with magenta ribbons to her hat, sniggered that Pallas had made another conquest.

If she had, then she would turn it to advantage. While the ladies flocked into one of the cabins to arrange their curls, and the gentlemen enjoyed a last cigar before the three o'clock dinner was served, Pallas took her opportunity—Abiathar having gone into the mess, where a long table was elaborately prepared, for a last glance at the arrangements. Her shadow, as she stood in the door, fell across him; he turned, and, seeing her there, so tall, so like a young queen, in her height that approached his own, thought of Matthew. Ay, they would make a fine couple—if all went well. If all went well. It was queer how, from time to time, in connection with the old school friend he had come to know well, a cool shadow of premonition fell across his thoughts. He and Matthew—like David and Jonathan these days. His face, masked by the sun and weather no less than by its burning beard, turned towards Pallas like a carving in red African wood; she found the piercing regard of his bright eyes offensive and spoke with cold brevity.

"Captain Crown. We have not yet seen more than a small part of the ship."

"You've seen, Miss Pallas, all it's int'resting or convenient from ladies' point of view to look over. Beyond quarterdeck, forecabin and the main-deck you're standing on, there's little 'ud amuse you and much as 'ud endanger them pretty ankles o' yours, if you was to venture below."

"What is below, Captain Crown?"

"The holds, ma'am, that's filled to the hatches with our trading materials: the printed stuffs, beads and such-like, that stands for fashion among your sex—not to mention my own—on Bonny River." He grinned, amused to wonder what a woman like Pallas Burmester would think, if she were to come face to face with one of the Slave Coast belles, her hips girdled with patterned chintz, and not another stitch to save her modesty save the hammered pewter collarettes the natives cut out of the basins that were one of their favourite articles of trade.

"I should like to see them, sir," persisted Pallas, her eyes on his.

Abiathar's hardened; apart from orders, he did not hold with laying the private parts of his ship open to female inspection. It was no fit place for a woman down there—stumbling over tackle, tearing her petticoats and seeing things it was not proper for her to see.

"I'm sorry to refuse you, ma'am: but my duty lies with my guests, and as the ship's still short of hands, there's nobody I can deputize to conduct you," he said shortly.

"Then I will go by myself, sir!"

Here was a fine specimen of female obduracy to deal with!

"I would remind you, ma'am, that as I'm captain on this ship, any action against my orders is to be treated as a breach of discipline," he stammered, wondering how in the name of the Lord he was to enforce ship's discipline on this lovely and rebellious creature. She was smiling, and, for once, he did not find a woman's smile agreeable.

"As Mr. Peddy is owner of this ship, and even you are obliged, I suppose, to take your orders from him, I shall be much obliged, sir, if you will request him to step this way."

It was certainly a means of shelving responsibility, and Abiathar had no qualms that John Peddy's decision would march contrary to his own. Muttering something, he stepped across the coaming out upon the sun-bleached deck: and Pallas, gathering her skirts about her, with a single glance of horror at the blackness below, slipped down the companion she had observed during their conversation. The narrow iron rungs hurt the insteps of her tenderly shod feet, and when she reached the bottom she was almost blind—although all the port lids were open, to air the between-decks, and, as her eyes accustomed themselves to the curious, brown obscurity, she found it easy enough to pick her way between the huge bales and cases which she had seen, a while before, from the hatchway openings.

Another opening in the crossplanks, and another iron ladder: the sickening stench of bilge rose to her nostrils as she bent over it, and she felt her stomach retch: for the mixture of the bilge with the old, old between-decks smell of rancid oils, decayed provisions and animal stock that was not to be dispelled by any amount of airing, and was, indeed, impregnated in the timbers, was enough to disturb more seasoned senses than hers. "Oh, God!" whispered Pallas, but, having come thus far, there was no turning back. She could hear footsteps pattering on the decks above, hear her mother's voice and Orabella's crying her name; the more peremptory tones of John Peddy joining in—"Are you there, Miss Pallas?—Dang the girl!"

Another hideous descent—and scuffling below: rats! For a moment her eyes closed and her head reeled, she clung to the rungs of the ladder, the palms of her hands wet inside the little rose-coloured gloves, now, no doubt, stained with grime and oil—and her dress! How would she ever walk back, through Bristol—?

What, she told herself angrily, was the humiliation of a ruined gown beside the suffering of a million negroes? Peering through the darkness—much blacker here than on the deck above—there was nothing to be seen, nothing to be touched; it was like a descent into limbo, it might have been fathom-deep in mid-ocean, with only the lap and suck of water providing a familiar sound, the more awful for its familiarity! She dared not step off the ladder, for fear of stepping into water. Could it be here they kept them, the wretched living cargo, the victims of men's pitiless greed for gold?

She could hear the footsteps of people coming in pursuit of her, and, suddenly, a horror of being captured down there, a kind of hysteria, took hold of her. Treading on the hem of her gown, hearing the delicate material split, sobbing with horror, she scrambled again up the ladder, and, too frenzied to know what she was doing, rushed in the opposite direction to the footsteps, bruising herself against the corners of boxes, on and on into increasing darkness—was there no end to this inferno?—through gaps in the bulkheads she

was too crazy to notice, until, stubbing her toes against something that made her cry out with pain, she fell to her knees; her hands, flung out to save her fall, were wrenched painfully at the wrists by striking some uneven surface that slid, then resisted, and, as she moaned and nursed her bruised limbs, her eyes, wet with tears, cleared themselves, to recognize, with horror, the objects on which she had fallen. The travelling chain, the neck collar, the wrist and ankle shackles, the thumbscrew and the dreaded "*speculum oris*"—like any other gently reared girl of Bristol, Pallas had never before seen these horrid articles, but instinct at once informed her of their purpose. At last she had found what she sought, and forced herself to memorize their appearance, before an angry hand jerked her to her feet.

"Miss Pally, this ain't well-behaved of you!"

What did it matter that the elder ladies' mouths were pursed with disapproval, the younger ones' round as O's—or that a hackney coach had to be sent for to convey them from the dock to St. Michael's Hill? Even Lydia was almost too angry with her elder daughter to speak to her; beyond saying shortly that Pallas had made herself the gossip of Bristol, her lips remained closed throughout the uneasy drive. Orabella was voluble.

"How you could go down into those disgusting places——! You've probably got lice on you, and I don't know how much beside. Upon my soul, Pally, I thought you were more delicate minded!"

What did it all matter? She sat with her hands clenched in their ruined gloves, her gaze wide and abstracted, her lips forming the syllables of her address to the meeting. "In that awful den, ladies and gentlemen, eight hundred negroes at a time are condemned to the torture of a living tomb! When the hatches are down, they have neither air to breathe nor light to see by. Crushed so close it is impossible to turn, they wear night and day the implements of their torture"—take care: was that accurate? Perhaps those vile shackles were only used for punishment—but for what crimes, poor innocents, were they punished? Only for their desire to enjoy the ease and freedom of their former untrammelled lives. . . .

II

Lydia was right: all Bristol was alive with gossip about Pallas's conduct on board the *Cassiopæia*: all Bristol, at least, which was not agog with the latest scandal from Gloucester—of how young Flood had captured the affections of a notorious London courtesan; some said it was the judge's kept woman, others, not daring to commit themselves so far, said it was one of the women at the Star and Garter: but all were agreed that Matthew was less to blame in the matter than the lady herself, who, it was reported, in the mysterious way such news becomes current in small communities, was pursuing him relentlessly with her attentions.

For once, rumour did Matthew no less than justice. He was at his wit's end to know what to do about Fanny Trine, whose penchant for his society, at the end of a week, had far outrun the bounds of discretion. Unalterable as was his devotion to Pallas, he simply did not know what to do about Fanny, who had him at her mercy; she never ceased to tell him how her life

with Pointevil revolted her, or to claim his utmost sympathy for her unfortunate position. At first she had contented herself with sending him letters a dozen times a day, their subject matter gradually increasing in warmth, until it was a wonder they did not burn up the wrappers in which they were contained!

But presently her demands became more specific; she was not to be contented unless he visited her every day, and these visits were torment to Matthew, for Miss Fanny was quite explicit about what was at the back of her mind. Each day he found her radiant, in toilettes more superb—and more exiguous in their quantity! At the same time, she must have been giving great satisfaction to her protector; for Pointevil's complaisance in court was phenomenal; there was no knotty point raised by now despairing counsel that he did not solve with a single destructive phrase; try as they might to bemuse the jury, the "twelve good men and true" were crystal clear as to the issue at stake, and had His Honour to thank for it! The verdict might be expected any day, and the disgust of the legal profession was so plain as to be laughable.

The end of the week had come, and the court risen for the Sabbath. There was no Saturday coach to Bristol, but, driven by his anxieties, Jason went to the unprecedented extravagance of hiring a private one. Perhaps he was encouraged by the assurance that the case would not go to the High Court. He entered the vehicle at just about the hour when Miss Clara Peddy was exploding a bombshell whose repercussions plunged others beside her immediate circle into confusion.

John Peddy had been much offended by Pally Burmester's breach of the conventions, and his family heard plenty about it. Never again, he swore, would he have his ships exploited as peepshows by a set of curious women. Though there was nothing to conceal aboard the *Cassiopæia*, and slave trade was a matter perfectly understood and appreciated in shipping circles, it was generally known that women folk did not, as a whole, favour the commerce which accounted for most of their luxuries, and slaving was a subject that was apt to be touched on lightly in feminine society. As an ardent conventionalist, Peddy objected to women pushing their noses in places where they had no right to be, and seeing things that did not concern them. Pally Burmester had behaved in an unwomanly fashion, and he would take care she had no further opportunities.

"You know, Papa, Pally is crazy about slave traffic," said Clara indiscreetly, having tired of the long diatribes to which she and her mother were subjected whenever her father was at home. "And I suppose she wanted to see for herself whether all the horrors they talk about at the anti-slavery meetings are true."

"Pray, miss, what do you know about anti-slavery meetings?" demanded her father.

The abashed Clara was obliged to admit that she had been to one or two during the winter—"when there is nothing on earth to do, Papa, unless one sits at home and counts one's fingers"—and John Peddy flew into a passion. If ever he heard, he said, of a daughter of his lending her presence to such senseless and ignorant twaddle, he would place her across his knee and mete out the punishment such insubordination deserved.

"As for Miss Pally, it's to be hoped her husband does the same with her!" he concluded, forgetting, in his rage, his promises to Shergill. "For a shipowner who allows his wife to go behind his back, miscalling the business that furnishes her with all the comforts of her home, is nothing but a craven—and a fool into the bargain!"

"Oh, well, Papa," returned Miss Clara—outwardly pert because inwardly impressed by her father's anger. "Who's to say if Pally means to marry a shipowner or not? Unless Matthew wins his case, there don't seem much prospect of his becoming an owner."

"That's all you know about it, miss: so hold your tongue."

The infallible instinct which warned Clara when she was on the brink of some exciting discovery caught her breath and dilated her little puggy nostrils. She dared not say a word, but she and her mother flashed glances, and Clara, reassured, knew that her curiosity would be satisfied before long. When the interest of Mrs. Peddy was roused, the patience of the cat squatting at the mousehole waiting for the appearance of its occupant was not to be compared with hers, and if now and again she advanced a velvety paw, it was only to push nearer to the hole the tempting morsel which the victim could not resist. It was midnight, however, and Clara, restless on her virgin couch, had given up hope and extinguished her candle, when the door was pushed softly open, and the figure of her mother, voluminous in shawl and pleated nightcap, crept in, candle in hand, finger on lip, with all that delicious affectation of secrecy and caution in which her kind delights in possession of momentous news.

"You'll never credit——! Oh, lud, oh, la—I thought I was never going to get it out of your father, but out it came at last—just before he went to sleep. Who'd ever ha' guessed——? Part-owner with your father and Tom Shergill of the *Cassiopæia*—and never a word to encourage me, when I was doing all in my power to make it a match—and what could ha' been more appropriate? I declare I could cry my heart out for the stupidity o' men!" The bundle of wool and bedgown came to rest like a captive balloon on the end of Clara's bed: Clara, bolt upright, her mouth a round O, hardly daring to accept the implications of her mother's confused sentences.

"Matthew——?"

Strangling with her excitement, Mrs. Peddy gulped, nodded her head, and, after a few more seconds of ardent whispering, crept back to her sleeping partner's side.

Sleep had fled from the pillow of her daughter. What news—what news for Orabella! What on earth would the latter say? How would she break it to Pally? And how would the latter take the revelation? Pally, so bitter against the slave trade, and so superior to those who profited by it frankly! The night seemed endless, and Clara could hardly wait to gobble her breakfast, have her hair dressed and be laced into her sack, before hurrying off in a gentle silvery drizzle of early morning rain to the house on St. Michael's Hill.

CHAPTER XVI

I

"You are no sooner here than it seems you are impatient to be gone," Fanny reproached him. Her little white teeth were set into her lower lip, her smouldering eyes were burning. In this mood, Matthew remembered, Fanny was dangerous. "I believe it's true—that I heard yesterday: that you've got another mistress in Bristol! Only show me where she is, and I'll tear her eyes out."

Matthew could not forbear a laugh at her violence; he caught and imprisoned her plump hands, whose fingers had clawed themselves as though they were already prepared to sink into the other woman's flesh.

"Now, dear Fanny, have common sense, I pray! Do you never stop to think that we are engaged in a course of preposterous danger? If Pointevil were to suspect this state of affairs, my whole future would be ruined."

"Suspect? You don't know the extent of his vanity. When I'm as kind to him as I've been for the past week, it is impossible for him to imagine a rival," she said contemptuously. "And all the reward I get is these tales that you're showing attentions to Charlotte Elliot! That last night you were seen at the theatre with her—with a little common trollop that's entertained the dustman in her time!"

"The very fact that you have heard these tales," said Matthew calmly, "shows how perilous our situation is, since every action, however innocent, is observed and made occasion for malicious gossip. If I've paid some trifling compliments to Miss Elliot—who may, as you say, be a trollop, but is a cheerful and unexacting companion!—it has been to divert the attention of the gossip from our own affairs. I care less for her than for the nail on your little toe!"—and if that shell-like appendage was a matter of indifference to him, what should she know about it? He flattered himself that he was as capable of concealing his indifference as of hiding his likes and dislikes, when it was politic to do so.

"You're going to her this evening!" accused Fanny.

"And if I am? You know it is imprudent for me to be seen here, night after night—even by so discreet a person as your landlady."

"Matthew!" She flung her arms wide. "I swear if you go to Charlotte Elliot's to-night, I'll do myself some injury. I will at least entertain no company if I cannot have that which, as you know by now, is the most pleasing in the world to me."

This flagrant declaration was followed by a pause. Matthew did not know what to say; the whole affair disgusted and made him deeply ashamed, and he wanted to go back to the hotel and write to Pallas

"Fanny——" he began.

She flung herself on his bosom.

"We've only got a few more days——!"

"Fanny, have you forgotten?" he said desperately. "To-day is Sunday,

and we cannot rely on Pointevill's movements, as we were able to during the week."

As though she felt him weakening, she laughed suddenly, raising her head from his shoulder and feeling for his hand with hers. Suddenly recovered from her importunate mood—remembering, no doubt, that importunacy is not a pretty quality in a woman who has begun to avoid strong lights, and in whom the allure of youth has given way to perhaps more voluptuous but less reliable qualities—she drew him to sit beside her on a little canapé with its back to the afternoon sun, that streamed strongly through the sitting-room window. Out of doors was a green shade of orchard trees and a restlessness of sparrows.

"That only shows how little you know him!" was her arch reply. "In all the years we have been together, I have never known him to alter the most trivial of his habits; it is part of the torture to which I am exposed that life, with him, has never the least element of surprise. You have seen his weekday routine; well, Sundays are no better. This morning, as usual, we drove for an hour, and he dined with me at two o'clock—an hour earlier than usual, because he goes to sleep after dinner, when he has not to be in the courts. At seven his servant will call him, and he will be at his papers until ten o'clock. At ten we sup, with company, over there"—she nodded towards the apple trees, that masked, with their heavy bosage, the broad red-brick façade of the judge's lodging. "It is always the same, wherever we may be: the least deviation from order is as a shattering of the laws of the Medes and Persians."

"Such regularity," Matthew could not refrain from observing, "must have its compensations, dear Fanny! It betokens great confidence in you—if nothing more."

"On the contrary, he's as suspicious as a ferret; and the only time I have the least liberty is when we go into the country. I suppose it is that, knowing my tastes, he thinks there's no rivalry to be feared from the bumpkins we encountered out of town! But let's dismiss the doleful subject; let us rather think that, between the hours of eight and ten, we can enjoy a pleasant interval in all the disagreeable affairs of life!"

Time was he had found her smiles irresistible; there was still, when she threw off her sombre moods, great charm about Fanny! In the gentle green twilight her looks seemed unimpaired; she bore herself like an empress, and there was no seduction of word or movement that she did not know how to employ to its fullest advantage. The lazy charm of an evening with her, as an alternative to the tedious company of lawyers, or the slightly racketsy gaiety of Miss Elliot and her companions, began to appeal to Matthew. There was ample time to write to Pallas, between now and the departure of the Wednesday coach—when, with luck, his fate might be settled! No quarrelling with Fanny before that was over. He needed, moreover, some sort of a mental sedative, though, with Shergill's lethargic presence at his elbow, he had managed to keep a tight rein upon his growing anxiety. He had not slept, however, for two nights: indifferent as he might pretend to be to the outcome of the action, it would have been less than human not to fret inwardly over the fact that he might be heir to a fortune!

And if this night's relaxation were to mean unfaithfulness to Pallas? It was clear what was in Fanny's mind, as it was impossible to remain impervious

to her soft, half surreptitious caresses. Ah, she was an experienced seductress, and, tired as he was in mind and body, it was not going to be difficult to yield to her.

Matthew tossed these considerations aside. Whatever happened should not harm Pallas, who would never know. All the same, when Africa shaved him for the second time, and handed him the clean linen which he had ordered for his evening visit, it struck him, and for a moment paralysed his actions, that he had grown during the last few months more—what was the word?—more squeamish: more scrupulous—than he had ever known himself in his life. Previously to his meeting with Pallas, he could have serious relations with one woman, and light ones with half a dozen more, without its occasioning him a second's thought. There had been more laughter in those days; but was there more happiness? He knew there was not. He had never, as a matter of fact, given much thought to happiness: life was a game of skill and chance, a continual sharpening of one's wits against those of other people; when the odds were with one, one was excited, triumphant, celebrant in a fashion too glaring and reckless to be described as happiness. Happiness, he had come latterly to understand, was made out of the solid things in life, the pride and virtue of family, the sense of building something permanent—not of subsisting shiftily on a series of hazards. Let the luck once more come his way, and he would be done with chance for ever.

It was in this sober mood that he went along to Fanny Trine's—having chosen a circuitous route, and making his entrance by a little side door in a deserted alley at the backs of the houses, which she had recommended to him as a more discreet means of entrance than by ringing the bell at the front. Yes, Fanny was discreet enough, for all her passionate outbursts, her imperious demands, she was no less anxious than Matthew not to imperil her future. Even an old and exacting protector, provided he is generous—which Pointevil seemed to be—was better than none at all.

Matthew found candles lighted, and Fanny in her flimsiest gown and most entrancing mood, ready to welcome him. . . .

II

Ann Flood was so thankful to have her husband once more by her side that she forbore, for once, to load him with the burden of her fears and misgivings. Questions indeed she showered on him, which Jason treated in the way husbands of that period treated the foolish curiosity of women, how was it possible to say how the case was going? The judge seemed an able fellow, and Rickaby satisfied: he would say no more to soothe the agonies of the woman whose eyes, red-rimmed with lack of sleep, strained towards him at every moment, as though they longed to tear out the thoughts that moved behind that narrow, ivory skull. During that brief week-end, Jason seemed to regain his authority in his household; his women, reduced by their anxieties, were meek and amenable to his lightest word. He became mildly paternal to the girls, standing with bowed heads, like a couple of reprovèd scholars, at his knee. Amelia was thirty, and Michael twenty-five; Jason praised the Lord who had given him complete control over their bodies and souls.

"And what have my daughters been doing during my absence? I trust they have many good works to their credit."

The two miserable girls began a stammering recital of each hour's occupation during each day of their father's absence in Gloucester: the pitiful round of visiting the sick, collecting for this charity and that, the hours spent over the garments they stitched for the poor, the meetings at chapel.

"I'm afraid, dear father, the cause is not so flourishing as it was when you went away," faltered Amelia. "Lady Gannet seems completely to have deserted us, and Pallas Burmester, who promised me to address the ladies' meeting on Monday night, sends word she is ill abed. It—it is a great blessing you are back."

From the mildness of Jason's reception of this discouraging news, it is to be inferred that he was not entirely displeased that his absence had made so strong a mark on local affairs. He went off in good humour to the timber-yard, where he remained until close upon midnight, assuring himself that Flood's was not on the verge of ruin. He wrote a long letter to the London manager, telling him as much as possible of the progress of the case, and reached home as the clocks were telling midnight, with the gratifying consciousness of not having broken the Sabbath.

On the following day he and Ann performed all their usual religious and charitable exercises, and, after the close of the evening meeting, a number of "the brethren" returned with him to Queen Square, and listened to a long exhortation on their duty to forward by every means in their power the work of God in these godless times. He had some slight qualms in referring to the war in these terms, since Flood's was doing very well through it; but this was a matter he could set right later when, his thin knees doubled on the cold planks at his bedside, he returned thanks for all the great favours and benefits shown to him and his business, and besought the further blessing of the Lord on his Gloucester enterprise.

The hired coach, which, as there was no stabling at Queen Square, had been sent to Brandon Hill overnight, was ordered for five in the morning, and, worn out, by his Sabbath zeal, no less than by the brief relaxation afforded by his home from the strain of the past weeks in court, Jason fell into blissful slumber. It is good to think that the week-end had been a pleasant one, for it was his last on earth.

III

Judge Pointevil, wearing the Madras silk peignoir of *déshabille*, with a large white napkin folded round his bald crane, which was sensitive to draughts even on the warmest day, when the wig was removed, snuffed his candles, placed the tips of his fine, thin fingers together and meditated upon the Flood case, which had fully occupied his thoughts since that devil Fanny had ceased plaguing him. He knew well that Fanny was his evil genius; that without her there was no advancement to which he might not aspire—even to the Woolsack itself—and yet that he could not live without her. This had been the blight on his career: that there was always some woman, dragging on his brains, on his abilities, on whose complacency he was as dependent

as the babe on its mother's breast. It had something to do—though he did not admit it—with the powerful sense of inferiority induced in his earliest boyhood by a crooked shoulder. By the time he was in his twenties it had become necessary, by the attachment of some woman, to assure himself that he was the equal, if not the superior, of his rivals in the lists of romantic adventure. When, for a while, he could disembarass himself of this painful preoccupation, he was one of the most brilliant expositors of jurisprudence on the judges' bench.

He had reached his conclusions twenty-four hours ago on the Flood lawsuit, and it remained only for him to direct the jury, in his summing-up, to the verdict he had in mind. The evidence, hard as counsel had tried to entangle it, showed distinctly that the second will was in order; he marvelled, as judges must often marvel, at the folly which had led the plaintiff to start a case on such flimsy premises. Carefully, and with no more than an occasional reference to his notes—he had a phenomenal memory—he traced the argument from its beginnings.

The night was hot; moths danced about the candle-flames, and fell, with shrivelled wings, like withered blossoms on the judge's table. In less than an hour the company he had invited would be arriving: Fanny first, trailing her shining tiffany through the orchard dew, her splendid bosom bare to the moonlight, jewels shining in her hair. Shaken by a sudden access of desire, his hands clutched the arms of the chair, his thin, twisted body stiffened. Fanny! She had been charm itself, the last few days. At this very moment, no doubt, she was tiring herself to entertain him and his guests; she took, always, a prodigious length of time over her toilette, at which he was never allowed to be present. Why not? So generous a lover had doubtless the right to demand all the privileges that a doting passion craves.

Nine o'clock and time for half an hour's sweet dalliance, at least. He thrust the thought aside. Habit, with him, was a god. He had established a routine, interference with which was, to him, an outrage upon the structure of existence. From seven to half-past nine were his unalterable hours of work, into which were compressed all of the day's effort; a period of almost superhuman concentration, to which he owed his reputation in jurisdiction. Whatever other hours he devoted to his private studies—and it was not unusual for him to be at his table when dawn started to creep about the room—they were worth little beside that short period when, his brain refreshed with sleep, he mentally summarized the questions of the day.

Once more he snuffed the candles. Fanny. It was as though she were there, in the room—so present to his imagination was the gleam of her dark, scented flesh, her lips like black carnations, her hair with its raven's-wing lustre and the sudden silvery flash of her teeth in her reluctant, almost sullen smile. Never before her coming had so splendid a creature been his; never had he known himself so helpless in the net of a woman's charms.

She had been irresistible the previous night; memory gave up a hundred inebriating pictures, piqued his appetite for the night that was to come. An hour, plague on it, before seeing her—unless . . .

The times when she had made mock of the clockwork regularity of his habits came back to the judge's mind. Herself a child of impulse, it was only reasonable she should not understand the importance of routine to such work

as his; with momentary surrender to the sweet folly of infatuation, he reproached himself with imposing too great a strain on that spontaneous nature. Supposing that, for once, he were to give her that surprise which, she declared, was the one thing lacking to make their relationship perfect? It was but small return for the blissful hours he enjoyed in her society. For the past week it had seemed—unaccountable creature!—as though she could not do enough to atone for her sheer devilry of the week before. But devilry was a thing Pointevil could, up to a point, appreciate; there was plenty of devil in his own composition.

He went to the window, to open it; the moonlight lay like frost upon the orchard grass, whitening the path she was presently to tread: the path along which he would conduct her, when their guests had departed. Hidden by her trees was her lighted window, perhaps uncurtained: the shining proscenium of her nightly toilette, shared only by the nightingale, the moths, the full-blown roses that nodded round her balcony.

He would go. . . . No! It was dangerous to establish precedent with Fanny. If once he were to break through that unvarying rule he had imposed upon their intercourse, it would mean ruin. Still, from the orchard shade, one could, without the sacrifice of one's principles, enjoy something of the charms denied one by one's principles. A trifling with temptation; still, a man's secret temptations were his own affair, and Fanny should not be so devilish seductive.

The air was warm as milk, the grass drenched with the dew. Under the crooked boughs of apple trees went the small crooked figure of Pointevil, strangely insignificant, robbed of its professional magnificence: an old man partnered by his shadow, sick with his desire, yet determined not to surrender to it. . . . Fanny's window was dark.

He felt himself cheated; trembling, clutching the handle of his stick, he could hear the thudding of his heart in the narrow cage of his chest. A phrase of liquid mockery from a nightingale dropped into the air, and there was silence. He felt like whimpering with disappointment. Disappointment was succeeded with a raging apprehension. Where was she, at this hour when she should have been laying the colour on her cheeks and the powder on her hair?

Drawn by suspicions across the narrow patch of lawn that fronted the little house, he checked beneath her window—whose sill was too high for him to look within; but not—alas for Pointevil!—to withhold the sibilance of lovers' whispers.

It was Fanny who, first aware of the passage of time, had roused her drowsy lover. Warm, dishevelled as a *mænad* after her triumph, she uncoiled herself from his side to murmur:

"You must go, my angel! God knows what the hour is, and I must call my woman, or be late for supper across the way!"

Her languid arm reached out to light the candles; she yawned with sleepy content as each small flame bit and steadied and filled the room with orange light.

"Mercy upon us, it's after nine! Be off—unless you want to ruin us both."

The figure at her side rolled over complainingly, scowled, then smiled: for by this light, and after her raptures, Fanny had a kind of splendour that killed

remorse; garlanded with the agapemononic myrtles, her beauty regained all the lustre it appeared in the cold light of day to have lost. He stretched out his hand for a last intimate caress—and found it paralysed in mid-air by a scream which, rent from the full depth of her lungs, shattered the amorous tranquillity of the scene.

Matthew, leaping with an oath to his feet, sick with horror and loss of dignity, came face to face with the twisted figure in peignoir and headcloth that stood in the doorway, and knew that all was lost.

IV

The court was packed, for apart from the fact that the news was abroad that verdict was pending and that all those who from interest or curiosity had followed the progress of the case were anxious not to miss the summing-up, the rumour had gone round of a desperate scene during the week-end, at the lodging of Miss Fanny Trine—now known to every one as the judge's lady-love—who had been discovered entertaining a friend whose identity had not transpired. As the idle chatter which, for a day or two, had linked Matthew's name with Miss Trine's had never been substantiated, and as he had taken care since to make himself conspicuous with the lively Charlotte Elliot, it was only the most irresponsible of the gossips who subscribed to the opinion that he was the judge's rival. As defendant in a case involving such tremendous interests, young Flood could hardly be fool enough to risk Pointevil's enmity in a matter like that! Fanny's landlady, well paid, kept her mouth shut; the personal maid, a girl from London, had had plenty of exercise in discretion. Nevertheless, all eyes in the court turned to Matthew, as he strode in, with Shergill on his heels.

So embedded were the thoughts of the lawyer in the thick folds of adipose that had obscured the original traits of his countenance, that nothing was to be gained by looking at that grey, fleshy mask. Matthew had confided all to him, and to Buckle, the previous night, and the latter coldly gave as his opinion that they might as well throw in their hand. Whatever verdict the jury, in their minds, had been arriving at, they would be helpless when Pointevil started his summing-up. No judge was his equal for presenting facts in the light he wished the jury to accept them, irrespective of counsel or evidence; and his malice lasted to eternity. In effect, Buckle threw up the case, though, as he said, shrugging his shoulders, his speech for the defence was prepared, and, up to last night's folly, he had had every hope of making an impression on judge and jury. Now, one might as well recite to the air. . . Matthew damned him vigorously, but cursed himself more.

Through the rest of the sleepless night he had forced himself to accept the downfall of his hopes, and, controlling his rage and bitter disappointment, had concentrated all the power of his thoughts on planning for the future of himself and Pallas. If only she might never know! He was, at least, no worse off than he had been a month ago, when she had faced with him the difficulties of their future, and had bravely decided to face it at his side. He had now to face Ralph Burmester, and, if he failed to make good his word, to devise some means of getting Pallas away from her father's roof. How

much more credit would Shergill allow him? There would at least be three hundred to come from Jason—at this moment, catching his breath, Matthew realized with a shock that in losing the case he would become liable for the costs. This indeed was a serious blow, a further cramping of his resources. And the bills he had run up in Gloucester——! Shergill had hinted on more than one occasion that he was overdoing it; was this a hint that he refused to accept responsibility if the tide ran the wrong way? If so, his position would be very much the same that it had been on his arrival in Bristol; the bailiffs would be after him again, and there would be nothing for it but a bolt in the night—with Pallas, if she could be persuaded to accept this inauspicious beginning to their life together.

There was a moment, towards dawn, when Matthew felt almost beaten; but, with the rising of the sun, all the old, stubborn resilience of character returned to reinforce the pride which, he was determined, should hold equally at bay the sneers of his enemies and the pity of his friends. He breakfasted heartily, and afterwards summoned Africa to shave and dress him for the morning's court: choosing deliberately the richest and finest of the garments he had brought with him. The coat, of dark ruby brocade, lavishly embroidered with steel trimmings, fitted like a glove over the long-sleeved cream waistcoat whose wristbands ended in deep ruffles of Mechlin to match the cravat whose folds were kept in place with a diamond buckle. A swaggering buck strode out into the sunlight, and, as a last offering to the gods who seemed to have deserted him, flung a handful of copper and silver pieces to the mob that waited, as usual, outside the gates of the court. Their cheers rang in his ears, as he mounted the stairs; what sort of reception, he wondered, would be theirs, when he came down them, a defeated beggar?

As he took his place at Shergill's side, it suddenly flashed across his mind that it would have been wiser to prepare for his instant escape after the verdict. Africa could see to it: have the horse ready, at some convenient place near the outskirts of the town, divert the attention of inquirers while he made his escape—whither?

This time the answer came pat: to Abiathar, of course! Abiathar, who would hide him aboard the *Cassiopæia*, while communication was established with Pallas and they planned out some means of mutual escape. If it were not for Pallas, he could have got out of England and solved the whole problem of his immediate commitments: but he would never leave her, and it was too much to expect of a delicately-reared girl to accompany her lover to sea in a rough trading vessel, that would not touch land for at least six weeks.

He could only wait to see how the morning went; if there was any opportunity, he would slip out and warn Africa. He would have liked to have taken the black man with him, for Africa had patently transferred his devotion from his late master to the present one, and Matthew hated to think of a faithful servant, left fretting and perhaps derelict, as much as he disliked the thought of being bereft of the skilful ministrations to which he had become accustomed. But there seemed no way of providing for this, as Africa was an indifferent rider and would never, even if a horse were forthcoming (Fordyce had returned to Bristol), be able to keep up with Matthew in his headlong gallop for the sea.

He stared around the court that still, waiting the judge's arrival, hummed

with conversation. Jason's counsel and Clay were murmuring together, but their client's seat was still empty. Knowing his uncle's punctuality, Matthew raised his eyebrows. He had heard of Jason's week-end visit to Bristol, but thought it odd if he had allowed anything to interfere with his punctual return to the scene of battle. Still, as Rickaby and Clay seemed in no way to be disturbed, he dismissed the matter from his mind.

Among the personnel of the court, the agitation was so marked that Matthew, if the situation had been less fraught with danger to himself, could have roared with laughter. Nervous ushers potted about, hushing without conviction the uproar to which they themselves contributed, by opening and shutting doors, shifting benches, shouting orders to each other and then countermanding them. At the solicitors' table books and papers were being continually mislaid, clerks sent flying and returning panting, immediately to be despatched on some other futile errand. The atmosphere of the court was electric: every one had heard of the Trine affair; any one, down to the little potboys who ran in and out with the lawyers' beer, knew what it meant to the morning's session.

At twenty minutes after the hour, the door at the end of the dais on which the judge's seat was placed opened, and a dead hush greeted His Honour's entrance. On his feet with the rest, Matthew flung back his head and met with a stare of defiance the man he had cuckolded the previous night. God, what a fool, what a fool! his brain was hammering. If only it had been worth while: but for Fanny Trine——!

Pointevil's face was the colour of lead and vicious as a rat's. He always hated his entrance into court, in the scarlet robes that made mock of his twisted shoulder, and he hated it more this morning; he'd make them pay for his hatred. As he took his seat, as he felt the familiar insignia of his power about him, the hatred died away in satisfaction. It was not often that a man found the weapons of revenge so close to his hand!

Buckle was on his feet, handling his notes in his usual blundering and inefficient fashion. He had seen Pointevil smile as he started his speech for the defence; others had seen it too; it was enough to congeal any plea, however well considered, and Buckle, as we have seen, was not a powerful pleader. He had stumbled into his second paragraph, when there was a disturbance at the back of the court. There was a man, in labourer's clothing, arguing with the ushers, who refused to let him in. Pointevil cried angrily for silence, the tumult continued. Evidently the newcomer had made an impression, for, with a doubtful look towards the judge, one of the ushers tiptoed, in creaking shoes, towards Clay, and whispered in his ear.

Clay started, turned to Rickaby's second, and spoke to him; he communicated with his principal; the three men exchanged glances of consternation, Clay and Rickaby rose and went to the door. Buckle, confused, had stopped speaking; he was ordered, in Pointevil's most dangerous and honeyed tones, to go on. He stammered, lost his place, dropped a sheet of paper. While clerks grovelled, Rickaby returned to his place, but he did not sit down. He was a thin, dark man with a profile that had earned him the nickname of "the bird of prey" among his colleagues. He remained on his feet, bowing towards the judge. Buckle had turned angrily towards him, ready to

deprecate the interruption, but Rickaby remained on his feet, leaning slightly forward.

"With all respect to your Honour"—his dry, impassive voice robbed the statement of its drama—"the action, for the present, is suspended. The plaintiff is dead."

While the court broke into an uproar of confusion, Matthew sat stunned as with a blow on the head.

V

It had come about in the simplest fashion. The hired coach had broken a trace, a few miles outside Gloucester, and the coachman, a clumsy fellow, had repaired it so badly, after an hour of labour, that it had gone again, within a mile of their last stopping place.

Jason, chafing at the delay, fearing to be late for the court, had insisted on walking on to the next village, where a conveyance might be hired to carry him on the remainder of his journey. But when he reached the cluster of thatched roofs that had encouraged his hopes, he found it to be little more than a farm with a few scattered outbuildings and cottages, and no vehicle to be had save a farm wagon. He was told that two miles farther on was the house of a doctor, who had a gig and might lend it, but, already exhausted with the road he had travelled, and not fully recovered from his stroke, Jason knew himself incapable of accomplishing the two miles on foot. He bribed a labourer to go instead, and beg the use of the gig, and, after an agonizing hour, was taken aback when the fellow returned, leading a saddle-horse—"Twas the best a doctor could do: the gig was being painted."

Never, when he could help it, did Jason travel on horseback; and then only on his old skewbald Maggie, so sleepily accustomed to her narrow round that it was hardly necessary to touch her bridle. He looked askance at the doctor's strapping chestnut, with a rangey eye, that seemed used to gauging the thicket when her master went hunting, and too-playful twitch of a clubbed tail. However, it was this or nothing. He accepted the labourer's help into the saddle, gave him fourpence for his pains—a penny a mile; it was adequate, in Jason's computations—and, despite a swimmy head and a thudding heart, set the chestnut towards Gloucester.

What happened later—whether Jason had a second stroke, or whether he was unequal to controlling the energy of his steed—will never be known; for a carter found him lying by the roadside, a couple of miles from Gloucester, with his head in a dried patch of blood. The horse was not to be seen, and, not thinking, from anything in Jason's appearance, that he was a person of any consequence, the cheerful carter enjoyed several tankards of beer at his usual houses of call, merely mentioning, in the course of casual conversation, that he had "a dead 'un" in the back of his cart. Shocked and faintly thrilled, in their bucolic consciousness, the countrymen and their wives and children had a look at the corpse, but it was not until its arrival in Gloucester that it was identified as the plaintiff in the Flood lawsuit. Matthew, riding back in the moonlight, noted, as in a dream, the brown patch in which his uncle's head had lain; the brown patch that made him heir to a fortune.

He had chosen to ride alone, although there were many who would have accompanied them. Giving out that he intended to remain in Gloucester for the night, to superintend the arrangements for the return of his uncle's body to Bristol, he let them go, galloping wildly along the dusty highroad, to be the first with the news in Bristol. A messenger despatched by Clay had already gone to Ann, and Shergill reported a conversation with Clay, after the court had been dismissed.

"It remains to be seen," Clay had said stiffly, "whether the widow will continue the suit."

"What was your answer?" put in Matthew. Shergill chuckled.

"Taking my tone from his, I assured him very solemnly that we should act on no assumptions until the other side was instructed. But it's my opinion, my boy, you've got nothing to fear. Your aunt was against the proceedings from the start: I marked that at the reading of the will. Like the majority o' women, she's terrified of the law—and I won't say she ain't got right on her side. Damme if it ain't enough to make one believe in miracles!—for nought but a miracle could ha' saved us, after yesterday."

There was some drinking in the privacy of his and Buckle's apartments, but open celebration was forbidden by the conventions attendant upon Jason's death. Nor, to Matthew's surprise, had he the desire to celebrate. He still felt bemused, when he mounted his horse, and started in moonlight towards Bristol. The fact that he who had ridden into Gloucester a beggar rode out of it a prince sobered him strangely. The only clear thought in his mind was Pallas; that he could now claim her, they could be married, and take up their lives in Triton Hall.

When he reached Bristol, and the Old Market, the first intimation of his altered state came to him in a cluster of youths who, as he rode past the old Pie Poudre Court, rushed out, bearing torches, yelling acclamations to the victor. He was the centre of a ring of red faces, of open mouths, his mare danced in the torchlight. For a second, the heady wine of victory mounted to his head, he laughed back, waved his hat and cantered to the head of the procession that formed behind him, tunnelling with flame and smoke the darkness of Peter Street and roaring with lusty voices their welcome to Hercules Flood's heir. The unexpectedness of the demonstration was part of its charm; he had not known that his affairs had so captured the interests of the public.

But when they reached Mary-le-Port and the Bridge, and the cavalcade had been swelled by scores of men and women, who had seemingly been waiting to add their share to the welcome, he halted, wheeled his horse and rose in his stirrups with uplifted hand. There was more than one among the older members of that assembly who held their breath, seeing, in the towering horseman, the very reincarnation of the Hercules Flood they remembered. Cries for silence obtained for Matthew the attention he sought.

"Good people of Bristol!" His voice rang stentorian along the empty wharves; in the following silence the sound of running feet along side-streets added to the anticipation of his audience. "I thank you for your goodwill, that it will be my duty, as it was my grandfather's, to merit. But let me call to your memories a house in Bristol which, this night, is a place of

mourning. In respect to my uncle's memory, my friends, disperse yourselves; there'll be plenty of time to celebrate, later on."

The appeal had its effect, for it was close on midnight, and the majority of the crowd was ready for its beds; a few roisterers persisted in escorting him through the town, but these were severally claimed by the taverns which still were open; only the torchbearers, formed into an orderly double file, preceded Matthew to Brandon Hill—where, in the lighted hall, he found the Cruikshanks, Peddys, Abiathar Crown and Dr. Fordyce waiting to welcome him. Throwing off the sobriety that so far had governed him, he surrendered himself to their congratulations and prepared to play the host, for the first time, in surroundings that were truly his. Impossible to say how many bottles were opened that night, how often the toast of the victor was drunk under those splendid chandeliers! But through all the hours of darkness the lights of Triton Lodge blazed across Brandon Hill—Matthew having ordered every room to be illuminated; and the new era began with the dawn—with cheerful, unsteady gentlemen stumbling across the park, wet with the morning dew, with a thousand candles paling in the rosy sunrise, that Matthew, when his guests had gone, greeted from the terrace from which his grandfather had watched his brave ships afloat on Avon water and thought with pride of the timbers his yards had contributed. Oh, beautiful city of Bristol, rose-roofed and flushed with its well-earned prosperity! Oh, beautiful lawns and trees and rose-gardens, soon more to be beautified by their lovely chatelaine!

She would know, by now: she would be waiting for his arrival. It occurred to Matthew for the first time that his future father-in-law had not been among the welcoming company, but the reflection gave him no misgivings. Ralph Burmester had never evinced any geniality towards him, and, no doubt, he brooded over the coming loss of his daughter.

CHAPTER XVII

I

THERE was rosy excitement in Betty's cheeks, the vicarious delight of her class in "a happy ending," and her demure lips invited a repetition of the embrace of the day in the fog; but Matthew had no eyes to-day for comely serving maids. He was up the stairs in three bounds, and opened the door to Lydia's boudoir, where, he was told, Pallas awaited him. If he thought it odd that Lydia and Orabella were not there, to add their congratulations to his lady's, it did not trouble him.

He had no words, nor had she, for that poignant moment of reunion, when each felt the heart of the other hammering in his breast; it was only when he released her, to refresh his eyes with her beauty, that he saw how pale and thin she had grown. But always his lovely Pallas! He shuddered, now, at the memory of Fanny Trine; he had an imprudent, and wholly irrational desire to confess all that folly to Pallas—to start the new life with no shadow of concealment between them; common sense, perhaps fortunately, rejected this concession to the sentiments.

"You're ready, sweetheart? I can't wait much longer! Do you know what I have been thinking? That if we are married soon—within a week or two—you will enjoy all the beauties of your new home before winter is here." He laughed joyfully. "Are you prepared, my love, to assume the responsibilities of a chatelaine? I'm afraid you'll find them onerous, to begin with, but your lover will always be at hand to help you, and we shall play at housekeeping like two children with a puppet-house, until it starts to bore you."

"And then?" She smiled at this light disposal of the duties of a household.

"And then the wars will be over, and we shall roam the high seas, as you have always longed to do. What should you say to paying a visit to my relations in Barbados? It might be amusing to look up my uncle Jonathan, for I believe he has a large young family, and nothing would so gratify me as to show of my beautiful wife to my cousin—who, for all I know, are complete barbarians, never having set foot in a civilized country in their lives! It wouldn't at all surprise me to find some of them as black as my shoes."

As she still seemed to hesitate, he went on eagerly:

"Do you know, that with grandfather's death I became owner of I am not yet sure how many ships? Think of that, Pallas! Think of canvas cracking overhead, the cradling rock of the waters while you sleep. You have never been on board a ship, have you?"

She had gone as pale as death.

"Once."

"When was that?" He looked at her quickly, and found, as he believed, the reason for her pallor. "There's little in common, you know, between our great, ocean-going vessels and the little pleasure cockleshells that can give you a plaguey unpleasant time! Why, I myself"—he chuckled at the memory—

"was once as sick as a dog, sailing down the Avon! Think of days when the sea is as smooth as glass: days when you shall lie under your canopy, and watch cormorants flying between sky and water so equally blue that you will not know where one ends and the other begins!"

"Is that what the slaves see?" she asked, with a bitterness that astonished and took him aback.

"Why, Pally! Is your mind always on the slaves?" he reproached her.

"Yes—since I visited the *Cassiopæia*."

"You were on the *Cassiopæia*?" He could not believe his ears.

"Your ship," she accused him. "Yours—and you kept it secret from me."

"Wait." He felt anger beating up, and paused to control it. "You must not misjudge me, Pally," he said evenly. "My part ownership of the *Cassiopæia* was a matter that concerned others, beside myself; for reasons which I can give you now, it was agreed that my share in her should be suppressed."

"The reasons being—myself? My attitude, well known to you, to the slave trade?"

"Nothing of the kind," was the sharp retort. "What the devil were you doing, Pally, on the *Cassiopæia*?" he burst out.

"Oh, Matthew—oh my dear love!" She sounded heartbroken, but she, like he, was clinging to her self-control. "I will tell you about it." In a voice thickened with grief, she described to him the disastrous visit; he listened, aghast, his back turned to her, his eyes fixed on the green shoulder of Kings-down. "You can't—you who are so kind-hearted and loving—you can't condemn poor human creatures to those miseries, for the sake of making money! What money can come from such a trade that is not cursed at its source, and bring anything but ill-fortune with it?"

"Pally," he said, after a pause. "I would give my soul for you not to have seen the interior of a slave ship, for it is obvious that nothing I can say can eradicate the impression it has made on your mind. Still, you have yourself to thank for an experience that others would have spared you; why didn't you take Abiathar's word, that the lower parts of the ship were no place for a woman to visit?"

"Why should I? Why shouldn't it be known that these unfortunate wretches are kennelled as one would not kennel a dog, chained as one would chain only the most savage of wild beasts?"

"You take an exaggerated view of a matter you don't understand. If you had asked Abiathar the reason for these provisions, he would have told you that the negro is the most treacherous and dangerous of animals, and needs controlling as one controls a cage of lions. The chains you saw are not for ordinary use, but to preserve discipline, when the lives of the ship's company are endangered by the savage conduct of the cargo."

"The cargo! You speak of them as though they were not flesh and blood like ourselves," she answered indignantly.

"I regard the negro precisely as I regard a herd of good cattle, and I have just as much interest in the preservation of his life and health. Pally, is the whole of our relationship to be embittered by the discussion of this foolish topic, on which you and I can never come to an agreement?"

"It is a topic we cannot afford to disregard." He saw the fingers of her hands tightening towards the palms. "We have to settle it now. Can't you

understand how deeply this question has entered into my—my very soul, so that it comes first in all my considerations?"

"That's a nice prospect, I'm sure," said Matthew, trying to speak good-humouredly, "if I am to marry a wife who puts the interest of niggers before those of her husband! Dear heart, can't you see the absurdity of it?"

"I can see how absurd it appears to you, and I despair of finding words to convince you I am wholly in earnest. This horrid commerce has got to stop, Matthew! You must help me to stop it. You must!" she cried a little wildly, "for I cannot bear that there should be any matter on which we are not joined in heart and mind. That is the true meaning of marriage."

"What do you want me to do, Pally?" he asked, to placate her, for, no longer pallid, a bright spot of fever burned on either cheek.

"Give up your ownership in these slave-trading vessels: get rid of them—have nothing more to do with them: unless you can turn them to other use."

He was silent. He could hear her quick breath, see the rise and fall of her bosom with her agitation. At last—

"You do not realize what you are asking. These are the days—perhaps the last days—when a fortune may be made out of slaving."

"Merciful heaven, haven't you fortune enough?"

"Like my grandfather, I am not satisfied to stand still! Money is useless, unless it propagates itself. I am not content—nor should you be for me—to sit down and dissipate my substance."

"Have I suggested you should do so? Grain and raw materials are what the country needs; is there not enough adventure in the importation of these to satisfy you?"

He made a movement of impatience.

"One cannot discuss these matters with women."

"If women are less able than men to hold their own in a discussion, it is the fault of the men, who consistently withhold from them the means of intelligent improvement. I am not stupid, Matthew, and the things that satisfy the majority of my sex have lost their interest for me. I assure you," she added bumbly, "that I should do my best to understand, if you would only explain to me the plans and ambitions which you cherish for the future: plans in which I may surely share, since we are to become one? I shall be so happy to be your pupil, and learn all you have to teach me—if only you will be a little patient, dear heart, and remember that a woman's mind, however willing, moves slowly in comparison with that of the superior sex! We have yet to recover, you know," she said, with her smile of entrancing sweetness, "from the centuries when no one ever thought it was possible for a woman to have a mind at all, let alone to cultivate it!"

Because he was touched, Matthew spoke roughly.

"I've got no fancy for playing the schoolmaster, and I do not want a wife who fills her head with matters that belong wholly to the masculine province! A busy man of affairs seeks relief from the cares of his business in the sweet ignorance of his wife. I warn you, when women start to meddle in business, they will forfeit all of the romantic regard in which they are held at the present time. Isn't it enough, my love"—his voice softened—"to exist as the ideal and inspiration of manly endeavour? I could not love you more, if I were to pretend to ask your advice, and accept your counsel, than I do in exerting

my natural instinct to avoid all subjects that might bring the shadow of care to your brow."

"What advice, or counsel, indeed, could I offer? The most I could do, most likely, would be to listen. . . . You know, it helps, sometimes, to talk a matter over, even with someone who knows nothing about it; it makes one more sure of one's own opinion." She stopped, biting her lip, as Matthew showed, by the superiority of his smile, his opinion of this argument.

"For the love of God, sweetheart, let us have done with this topic! I am in no mood to-day for anything but rejoicing. I have a thousand plans for our immediate pleasure that I'm impatient to set afoot—and I am going down to the mill to see your father!"

"And the slave ships?" She avoided his embrace, with such a look of strain and anxiety that he did not know whether to be irritated or compassionate.

"What of them?"

"You will give up slaving?"

"Pally, you cannot be serious."

"Dear God, what can I say—what can I do—to show you I am serious?"

"And suppose"—his own breath came harshly; the blood ran up purple to the edge of his hair—"and supposing I refuse?"

Her eyes closed; she swayed as though about to fall; he stood coldly apart, resisting his desire to catch her in his arms.

"How can I ever," she breathed, as though to herself, "become the wife of a slave trader?"

"Pallas!" His voice cracked like the thong of a whip. "I warn you to take care! I am not to be tried too far."

"And I? And I?" she cried. "Am I to submit—without thought or reason—to a state of affairs which all my conscience tells me to be wrong?"

He had no recollection, afterwards, of what he had said; the words boiled from his lips, a wild and unconsidered outburst of rage, remonstrance, of fulmination upon her feminine obstinacy. Transported by his passion from decency and sober judgment, he even accused her of complicity with her family, to evade her promises to him.

At the end of a scene degrading in its violence, during which her frozen silence stung him to worse atrocities than any amount of expostulation, he left her with an ultimatum: in three days she should give him her decision, and he would either know himself betrayed, or claim her instant submission.

II

Of the crew that mustered to sign articles, there were not more than half a dozen that could, by any stretch of the imagination, be classed as seamen. A hangdog procession, quickened by the mates' persuasion in the rear—both carried firearms, to cut off possible fugitives—filed before the captain's table, to set their clumsy crosses in the place indicated by his thumb. Not a few hands were unsteady, and made the mark reluctantly, for signing on board a slave ship was akin, if not actually equivalent, to signing one's own death warrant.

Near the tail end of the procession came a stumbling trio, whose stupefied faces expressed bewilderment at the situation in which they found themselves; one of the men had an enormous purple weal from the chin to the corner of the eye, and the bloody bandage on another's wrist left its grimy stain on the paper as he signed. Abiathar winked, and spoke behind his hand to Matthew, who lolled at his elbow, watching the ceremony.

"Shipped 'em last night from the Crown an' Spanker, an' they've only started to realize what's happened to 'em! Start that fella," he broke off to growl, as a high-pitched whimper broke from one of the unfortunates, a youth of apparently no more than fourteen or fifteen years of age. The crack of the boatswain's rattan ended the disturbance, as Abiathar muttered: "Tain't the way I'd choose to man a ship, but by the time the bloody navy's had her pick, you can make the best o' the leavings."

The man who now stepped up to the table was, to the eyes of all present, of a different breed; short, broad, with eyes like splinters of sapphire in a piece of tanned and wrinkled leather, it took little perspicacity to mark him down as one of those true sons of the sea, "begotten in the galley and born under a gun." Neat and self-respecting in appearance, he saluted smartly as he said:

"Axing your pardon, sir, I take it we may read the articles afore we sets our hands to 'em?"

An explosion of profanity greeted this seemingly reasonable request, and the speaker was informed, in terms that left no room for argument, that he could either sign or be clapped in irons. There was a moment of hesitation, during which the sapphire splinters sparkled; then a rough brown hand reached out, to pick up the pen, and to sign, not with a cross, but with the full name and initials, J. R. Bowling. After a glance at the neat, crabbed signature, its owner straightened himself, saluted once more, and followed his future comrades out of the cabin.

"Navy deserter—for a penny. Well, it ain't no business of mine. A couple more o' that sort, and we'd handle a mutiny."

"What would make him quit the government, in times like these?" inquired Matthew curiously. Abiathar shrugged his shoulders.

"Who's to know? Private affairs—trouble with superiors. . . . It ain't a bad thing to have a handle like that, in dealing with a chap; any argyment, and you threaten to hand him over. We'll get our money's worth out o' Mister Bowling, afore we've done." He scattered sand over the wet ink, and thrust the sheet in a drawer. "That's the last o' the rabble, and I hope you're satisfied, Mr. Owner Flood, with yer crew!" He laughed sourly. "If all goes well, we'll get away with convoy within the next forty-eight hours. There's *Tartar* and *Phœnix* fitting, and *Halifax* and *Constantine* already out o' dock and anchored in the Broadway; if we can get away in their company we ought to clear Land's End and make the high seas without trouble from the enemy."

One of the West African Company's clerks came in with the passenger list, that Abiathar perused scowling.

"What do they think we are—bloody pleasure schooner? Twenty-one, no less!" The thick, red-and-blue mittened finger ran down the list. "Nine military tellas for Cape Coast, four for Accra. A couple o' traders, new on

the job, thinkin' the Slave Coast's the land o' milk an' honey! Who's this—Mister Arnold Doran?"

"Christie Doran and Company, sir; the young gentleman's either son or nephew of one of the directors—I don't rightly know which."

Abiathar mumbled a few more profanities, reflecting upon directors' sons in general, and their undesirability as passengers.

"We'll put him next the oil an' tallow; it'll fettle him up for the stink o' the barracoons. That'll do, mister; good-day." He nodded curt farewell to the clerk, a pale and nervous youth who seemed relieved to accept his dismissal.

"And the rest?" Matthew jerked his head towards the list which Abiathar had flung on the table.

"The ornery trash—fellas that thinks for one reason or another mosquitoes an' yellow fever's more healthy than the climate o' their native shores! Give me niggers; with them there's no argyment, but passengers is the bane of a master's life. Help yerself." He pushed the rum noggin nearer to Matthew's elbow, and looked curiously, for the first time, at the young owner. "What's burnin' you, cock?"

"Nought," said Matthew shortly, and pulled out his watch. "I must be off; I have business in the town."

"We'll meet to-night," nodded Abiathar: the custom, instituted by Hercules, of dining his partners in shipping and the captain of the ship on the eve of departure, had, by agreement between Peddy and Shergill, been revived. Matthew had wished the entertainment to take place at Triton, and had argued the point with Peddy, whose reluctance to give in he (Matthew) attributed, rightly, to jealousy. The two older men, although anxious enough to secure his co-operation, were not minded to accord to the newcomer the pride of place which had been given to Hercules. The argument was dropped, only because, distracted by the situation with Pallas, Matthew had ceased to be interested in the project. The supper was to take place at the Bush tavern, a house famous for its "turtle ordinaries," and its arrangements had been left in Peddy's hands. Matthew did not welcome the prospect; the excitement, the sensation, to which he had previously looked forward, of speeding the parting vessel was damped down by his miserable anxiety about Pallas.

Shergill, with whom he had made appointment, received him with beaming good humour, and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Was I right? Was I right?" His bubbling triumph drew on him a cold look from his partner. "The other side's thrown in their hand, my' boy, and we're all in clover."

"It is no more than you had led me to expect," pointed out Matthew, realizing, but not admitting, that he had taken victory so completely for granted that it was interesting to conjecture what might have been his emotions had Ann Flood elected to continue the suit.

Her husband's body lay at Queen Square, waiting for interment: the confirmation to her of all her misgivings.

"When's the funeral?" he carelessly asked.

"Damme if I took the trouble to find out," Shergill admitted. "I take it you'll be wishing to attend?"

"I can do no less," mumbled Matthew.

During the next two hours he signed innumerable documents; took in as

much as he could of the multiformity of his grandfather's interests; authorized the disposal of the timberyard, and got some idea of the various shipping ventures in which Hercules, directly or indirectly, had been engaged at the time of his death. He found himself part owner of eleven ships, five of them, including the *Cassiopæia*, slavers. The slavers, he saw, with savage satisfaction, yielded between eleven and fourteen per cent more profit than the six merchant ships combined. Who but a madman would reject such profits?

Shergill explained the various sums which were at his immediate disposal, and the aggregate of these, which would, in other circumstances, have elated him almost beyond reason, were accepted without comment: indeed, with a laconic indifference which made Shergill, like Abiathar, wonder what was the matter. If the young one had lost his case, he could hardly be in more captious mood.

"So now, when the obsequies are over, no doubt you'll be preparing to assume the bonds of matrimony!" The snuffbox, weapon of all its owner's waggeries, was driven into Matthew's ribs.

"Reserve your predictions, sir, until they're called for!" was the ungracious retort, that set Shergill, and the Peddys, and all to whom it was repeated, agog with speculation. Was Pally Burmester going to reject another suitor?

"There's women," observed Shergill, in his friend Peddy's company, "that seem to have a nat'ral disposition towards spinsterhood: but 'tisn't common, without some physical defect—like my poor gel's—to account for it. Still, if Pally's that way—and 'twould be naught but a waste o' lovely womanhood—I wager the Lodge 'ull not wait long for a mistress." A wink at his companion, and a glance of satisfaction at the towering stack of Flood deed-boxes that had just been conveyed from Clay's office—where they had rested for the better part of a couple of centuries—concluded the observation.

It is worth remarking that Miss Clara Peddy was very quiet those days. She was a mischievous but not ill-natured girl, and the effects of her ill-timed gossip appalled her. When her mother cheerfully hinted that Pally Burmester's wedding didn't seem so much to be taken for granted as people had assumed, since there was still no public announcement: and when she spoke of a new gown for Miss Clara, and an invitation to Matthew to dine *en famille*, Clara clapped her hands to her ears and ran out of the room. Pally looked awful; and it was not agreeable to think that one might, in part, be responsible.

III

"Pally, my love, if you prefer it, I will gladly see him, and spare you the pain of this final meeting."

"Dear Papa, since I have got myself into this trouble, and the responsibility is mine, I will not burden you with the results of my folly."

Ralph looked with anxious affection at his daughter. Pallas had changed; in place of that tender, irresistible immaturity, which, like a rose-coloured veil, had lent glamour to her beauty and delicacy to her wit, a thin, cold, autumnal bleakness had fallen on the child he loved so well. Her moment of weakness over, Pallas had rejected all compassion, as she rejected attempts to discuss with her the matter which had brought about the change. Even

Orabella was kept, gently but coldly, at a distance: as though Pallas dared not accept the caresses, the endearments and tender fondlings with which her little sister would have tried to console her. So it was Orabella who cried herself to sleep at night, while Pallas lay dry-eyed, making her act of renunciation in the dark solitude of her soul.

"My dearest child, are you sure you are making no mistake?"

He, who a few short weeks ago would almost rather have seen her dead at his feet than married to a man against whom his every instinct warned him, was now ready for her sake to revoke all his former misgivings. To bring back the colour to her lips and the lightness to her step, he would have gone to Matthew Flood and commanded him to marry her.

Pally—an old maid. He had jested about it once, but it now seemed to him the most tragic fate that could overtake all the budding beauty in which he had had so deep a pride. The withering of an unblown rose. . . . He knew, at last, too late, what Lydia had longed for him to realize: that for his child, as for himself, the rose of love bloomed only once, and that there was nothing now for the plant but to decay into the soil from which it sprang.

"Is there no means of compromise in this sorry affair?" he pleaded. "You're breaking my heart, Pally, as well as your own; does that mean nothing to you?"

"It means much," she answered steadily, and it suddenly seemed to him that her look was Lydia's: that look of benign forbearance for a child who does not know what, or how much, it asks. "Your heart, dearest Papa, is wounded, and I would give all I have not to have wounded it; but it is not broken. In all your life, you've never been unfaithful to a principle; can you blame me for standing to mine? Truly, I've considered everything, so carefully, and I've come to the conclusion there can be no happiness in a union to which is sacrificed all of one's beliefs, all that stands, in one's opinion, for the supremacy of right over wrong. You know it is now several years since I dedicated myself to the suppression of that infamous traffic; and what weight could my opinion have with any one if I were to found my married life on it?"

Ralph shook his head.

"I doubt, my dear, if you and the few who think like you will ever bring about the extermination of a trade that involves so much of our country's prosperity. Think what the sugar plantations mean to our revenue!"

"I would rather never taste sugar again in my life, than subscribe to so wicked a trade!"

"You are an extremist, Pally, and perhaps it is as well that few hold your opinion. Sugar is not merely agreeable to taste, it is health-giving. While I deplore their methods, I think the slave traders are not so evil as you imagine; it is rather the people whom they employ who are to blame for the abuse of the negro—which I would never deny. In fact, although I have had several opportunities of taking part in a slave-trading gamble, I could not bring myself to indulge in what was, evidently, a profitable venture. I think"—he smiled a little—"it may have been because my mother was a Quaker, and the Quakers, as you know, have been against slavery for more than a hundred years." He paused, before adding: "I cannot say, however, that I have ever been moved to interfere with those who pursue a form of commerce which is necessary to our national well-being."

"I can't agree with that, Papa!"

"Is it not possible that you might in time establish your influence sufficiently to convert Matthew to your point of view?" he murmured wretchedly.

She shook her head.

"It is a dream I have rejected, with many others. I think if Matthew had been poor—if he had not won the case, if he had not had all this fortune poured upon him—then I think it might have been different. But it now seems there is a great wall of gold between us, to which he is only intent on adding brick upon brick: never seeing that each brick shuts us a little more and a little more away from each other. . . . No, I've lost Matthew, Papa; and I'm trying so hard to be glad I found it out before it was too late!"

"But he loves you!" Strange, thus to be pleading the cause of a man one hated so.

"Papa, Papa! Won't you please try to find comfort in having bequeathed to your Pally something of your own high principle, that gives her courage now to set aside her own selfish desires? Oh, Papa, if you love me, help me to be brave!"

What could he do but bless her, as she went alone to the room where Matthew waited?

Lydia came to him, as he bent, blind with his tears, over the desk on which his papers were scattered, and the two of them clung together.

"Oh, Papa, what are we to do with our poor child?"

"Pally has endless courage." He tried to comfort her.

"But courage! So harsh, so arid a quality, for my poor, tender Pally! Oh, Ralph, I had so looked forward to holding Pally's children in my arms."

There was no answer to this. He stroked her bowed head.

"And Matthew? I know you hate him, and I suppose I should do so as well; yet I can think of nothing but the ruinous effect that this must have upon his nature. He loved her."

"I love you," said Ralph, in a voice that made her tremble, "and there is no thought of yours with which I do not strive to put myself in agreement; but from this hour I command"—she lifted her head in astonishment, for never in all their married life had she heard him use the word—"that his name shall not be spoken in this house. Tell Orabella."

"I will tell her. But"—she looked at him straightly—"you will be the one to break your own command. For Pally's sake."

"... It is your unalterable decision?" Matthew was saying. His head was lowered like a charging bull's; he looked almost as though he might knock her down.

"I shall love you for ever, but I cannot marry you," she told him, through stiff lips.

He slowly straightened himself, and stood for a moment looking across her head, as though seeing beyond her life and his. So might the bull look, having received the stroke of the matador's sword

Farewell, beautiful venturing. A long procession of dreams, receding, their bright colours fading, left the dust rising in their track; nothing left now, but the poisonous dust.

He said:

"Very well, Pally; and the measure of your love shall be the measure of

the regret, for you and yours, of this day's work. I will not tell you not to forget me, for, by God, you never shall."

IV

Bulkheads were shifted, pock-marked timbers masked with fresh coats of paint; a spacious cabin was preparing on the main deck, to the discomfort of other passengers, who, on and off the ship like dogs at a fair, pestering all who would listen to them for the cause of delay, brought curious tales ashore. According to these, there were walls hung with tapestries, Turkey carpets a foot deep on the floor of this sybaritic apartment; woven curtains of Eastern fabrics screened its ports and draped a bed no less luxurious than that of a courtesan! Crates of glass, china and household linens were brought aboard daily—it looked like a honeymoon voyage, rather than a slaving trip. The bestowal of cases of wines and provisions within handy reach of the cabin's future occupant was supervised by a negro in livery. . . . Such tales soon reached the ears of Messrs. Peddy and Shergill, who pulled their lips and looked askance. They had already received Matthew's curt intimation of the fact that he had decided to accompany the *Cassiopæia* on her Guinea trip, and accepted, albeit with their tongues in their cheeks, his avowed intention of "looking into" the African end of their business. They were not slow at putting two and two together; Pally Burmester had turned him down—that news, already, was all over Bristol. John Peddy had had an earful from his wife. Why, tearfully demanded Mrs. Peddy, were they allowing Matthew to depart? He only needed a little fussing, a little consoling, a hint of feminine interest, to get over Pally's behaviour—as dozens had done before him. "And now, you great fool, you're letting him go and heaven knows the trouble and entanglements a man in his state of mind gets into!" "He ain't likely to meet with entanglements on the Gold Coast," grunted John Peddy, at which his wife tossed her head and asked him if he ever remembered it was his duty to look after his daughter's future

"Dat's all de stuff, Mars' Matthew," Africa was saying, as the last of the iron-studded trunks was carried down the Triton stairs by the men Abiathar had sent up from the *Cassiopæia*. There was an uneasy air in Triton, and much whispering behind doors, for Matthew had paid off the staff, which even now could hardly believe in the events which had come upon them. Just when they all thought they were settled down, and had accepted the reign of a new master, the news was sprung on them that the house was to be shut up, and they could look for other employment!

Matthew set down the bottle unsteadily and cast an uncertain eye over the hand-baggage which Africa had piled near the door. He had been drinking for the best part of twenty-four hours, and his features, empurpled and thickened by wine, so resembled those of Hercules that the black man stared dumbly, scared in his marrow by this reincarnation of the dead.

Matthew tried to rise, floundered, swore, and reached for his henchman's shoulder, and Africa performed mechanically the duty he had so often performed for the elder Flood. Hoisted on to his feet, Matthew stood swaying,

while Africa laid the cloak across his shoulders. There was something he could not remember.

"Does you want somep'n else, Mars' Matthew?"

"The keys," he muttered.

"I'll go fetchum, Mars' Matthew. Mars' Matthew, de servants am waitin', to tell yo' good-bye."

"I want no good-byes," said Matthew roughly. "They have their money, bid them be off."

He lurched to the window, and stood looking—for the last time, he told himself—across the green lawns, with their well-placed, occasional trees, at the loop of the drive, coiling itself round the house like a whip-lash, before it was swallowed in the shrubberies, at the golden-rosy walls of the stable buildings, glimmering through a mesh of beech-leaves.

Presently the servants came round the corner of the house, carrying their bundles; they went, it seemed regretfully, down the drive, with backward glances at the house they were leaving. All looked puzzled, and a stupid housemaid was snivelling in an access of sentimentality. Her pert, apple-cheeked companion, seeing Matthew at the window, had actually the impertinence to blow him a kiss: a gesture which, intercepted by one of the older servants, earned its author a clip on the ear; for a moment they all stood still, as though shocked, looking back, like travellers setting forth bewildered to an unknown destination.

Matthew was surprised into a laugh. The impudent hussy! For two pins he'd be after her. . . .

"Here am de keys, Mars' Matthew."

"And you," he muttered, as he took them "What's to become of you? Do you want me to find you a new master?"

"Lawd save us, Mars' Matthew! Yo' don' never mean you' gwine to leave Africa behind?" gasped the negro, his eyes bolting out of his head at a prospect which he had clearly never visualized. Before Matthew had time to reply, Africa cast himself on the ground, clasping his master's knees, while tears streamed down his upturned face. "Yo' neveh gwine to leave dis po' niggah behind yo', Mars' Matthew? I'se gitten an ole fella, I don' want to work fo' no new master! I an't got much longuh to live, and I bin telling myself yo' wus taking me back to die 'mong my own people!"

"Get up, you fool!" Matthew cuffed him lightly. "An old fellow, are you? Then you aren't much use to me."

"I an't so ole as all *dat*, Mars' Matthew!" protested Africa, scrambling to his feet.

"You were sixteen when you came to Grandfather, and that's getting on for twenty years ago. Thirty-six! 'Tis a monstrous age. Die among your own people—you'll die before then, if you treat me to any more of your play-acting. Why, you humbug! You've never seen your people, as you call them; you were born here, in Bristol, and you and your mother were sold at the Trow: I've seen the paper signed by the dealer who handed you over!"

"I'se a black man all de same," persisted Africa, "and I want pow'ful to see de land where b'long all de black people. Take me with yo', Mars' Matthew."

"And suppose," said Matthew, "we never come back?" A bell tolled somewhere as he said it.

He took no further notice of Africa, who, however, seemed to take the matter as settled, picked up the baggage, and followed him to the door.

The sunshine bathed them as they walked out on the porch. Roughly Matthew dragged the door after him, and heard it slam into its framework. The lock grated; pulling out the key, he hesitated for a moment, then flung it high over the tree tops. The faint noise of its fall among the dry leaves of the shrubbery came to them as they descended the steps.

"This is my world," he said, as he stood gripping the bulwarks. "And, by God, I should have known it before."

"Well, it's yer own choice," said Abiathar dryly. "You'll know, in a day or two, if it's your world or not, but by then it 'ull be too late to change yer mind, if it ain't to yer taste—don't say I didn't warn ye, cock."

"Call we when we sail," he said, turning towards the cabin. "I wouldn't for the world miss saying farewell to the land of my fathers—to England, home and beauty—may they rot in hell! And then," he mumbled, as he rolled upon the coverlet, "we'll drink together, all we jolly damned, to the glorious—flamin'—future—where there's no women—only jolly, black devils—and dance—dancing in the sun!"

Abiathar stood for a moment looking down upon this notable addition to his responsibilities; then, with a grimace for the cabin and all its contents—not so lavish as had been reported, but sufficiently exotic to offend his seaman's eye—he returned to his duties: to the business of pursing the passengers whose baggage still cluttered the between-decks, to formal farewells to the sundry people who had come aboard for a last drink with the skipper, and to clearing the ship before the gang-plank was raised.

At four in the afternoon the lifting waters gently floated the ship out on the river. Cries of farewell, waving of kerchiefs from the little knot of women assembled on the quayside to see the last of their menfolk: long months of emptiness ahead, babies to be born, vows, perhaps, to be forgotten, empty stomachs and aching hearts for those left behind; and for those who sailed, what red hell before the green English landscape brought its balm to eyes sore with the tropic glare? It would be one year, and the greater part of another, before those men and women whose little fortunes were woven into the sailing of the *Cassiopæia* looked in each others' eyes again.

Slowly the red roofs drop behind, with the broadening of the river meadows and trees take on a curious remoteness. On the bulwarks lean men who, though their last word for England may be a curse, have emptiness in their hearts. For some there is the prospect of return, for others the knowledge that never again, while breath is in them, will they know these quiet shores. For these it is the crossing of the Styx, and their throats grow tight, while their eyes strain to hold back the tears; for however a man may hate his country, there is, in the moment of final rupture, an inexpressible sadness. Matthew, dishevelled but sober, gazed back at the town which, for a few short months, had been the casket of his brightest hopes. High on Brandon Hill, the windows of Triton Lodge caught the westering sun and flung it back in sheets of flame.

Let mould and spiders take possession, and stone crumble from stone; its

place in Flood history was ended. The remainder of that history was to be written, perhaps, on African sands.

Seeking hate, he found in his heart only a bitter grief: but it was less for what was left behind than for himself, the victim of malignant fate. Pallas . . . lovely, perfidious Pally, who would "love him for ever," but sent him away alone, to find oblivion of her perfidy. "And I will find it," he swore.

The flat, calm, countryside went by, while the topsails broke overhead; the *Cassiopeia* rolled gently as the first breeze took her, the breath of a new life entered into his lungs.

END OF BOOK I

Brighton, September, 1938.

ATLANTIC INTERLUDE

THERE was from the first a curious excitement in being a unit of so barbarous a community: a sense of existing upon a volcanic crater that stimulated Matthew's love of adventure, and gradually helped to drive his personal grievances into the back of his mind.

A week sickened him of the over-luxurious cabin, of the isolation that at first satisfied him, since he had nothing in common with the seedy, raffish passenger gang who, as soon as they recovered from their sea-sickness, formed gambling cliques and soaked themselves with the raw liquors provided for their refreshment. He had no desire to join this squalid company, to mix himself in their petty squabbles or to stake halfpence on their greasy cards; it was too like a down-at-heels version of the society he had previously enjoyed in London. Despising this riff-raff, he found it infinitely more entertaining to learn the tricks of seamanship from the first mate. His great weight and height giving him advantage over the more experienced, he found, as it were, a reason for his strength, which had previously seemed a quality idly bestowed by providence on one who had little use for it.

The crew, which at first distrusted this spectacle of an owner working among them, had reluctantly to accord respect to the feats of strength and daring of which he was capable. He had the courage of complete indifference; caring neither for life nor death, stung always by the superfluity of physical energy for which it was hard to find outlet in the narrow confines of the ship, he became almost an object of superstition, even among those who hated him for setting a standard to which they, either from indolence or lack of physical stamina, were incapable of conforming. And all save one resented this spectacle of a man rich as Cræsus "spoiling the job" for those who did it, not for pleasure, but as a miserable and detested means of supporting themselves and their families. The one exception was the old tar, Bowling, who, despising the clumsiness and skim-shanking methods of his companions, gave dour approval to Matthew's efforts.

There were some curious incidents. One day an iron pump-bolt dropped through a hatch beneath which Matthew was standing, and escaped braining him by a fraction. On another occasion it was a fishgig, which, the thrower declared, exhibiting a pair of slimy hands in support of his claim, had slipped from his hold as he was on the point of launching it from the bows. Matthew looked thoughtfully at the four barbed points stuck in the barricade, and at the six-foot pole that still quivered with the force of the impact, and turned. Before the fellow—a shifty-eyed half-caste nearly as tall as himself, but narrow and slippery as an eel—had grasped his intention, Matthew seized him by hip and shoulder, and, lifting the terrified wretch up to the full extent of his arms, dashed him through the nearest hatch. The crash of his bones sounded from the darkness below.

After that, there were no more attempts on Matthew's life, but he was hated. Hated, first, because he was all that every man aboard would have given his soul to be: rich, authoritative, healthy, well-fed, free. The passengers shared

this hatred; a few had tried to scrape his acquaintance, and he showed them with insolence that he wanted none of their society. Cocked-up bastard! You wait and see, the Coast'll take it out of him.

The crew hated him because they believed, unjustly, that he took advantage of his freedom of the fore-castle to spy on them. In truth, Matthew was too indifferent, too centred in himself, to trouble about such things; the ship was Abiathar's responsibility, and if he helped him to maintain discipline, if he watched with a cold eye the floggings at the gratings, and occasionally reported a man for some punishment which it was left to the captain's ingenuity to devise, it was with no idea of misusing his privileges. He had no emotion towards, no sense of unity with the men among whom he worked; at the same time no sort of animosity towards them—so long as the work was done.

One day, primed by his companions, one of the fore-castle hands challenged him to fight. If he shared fore-castle life he must be prepared to share fore-castle manners, was the argument, in which Matthew agreed. Abiathar stuck out his lip and disapproved; he also took pains so to occupy his crew that the majority had business elsewhere at the time the fight was due to take place. But even slaver discipline may be evaded; Matthew and his opponent had "a full house," and there was loud betting among the passengers on the result. In five minutes the big, hefty ex-pugilist was a blind and bleeding lump, and the victor was being rubbed down in his cabin by a palely triumphant Africa. It struck Matthew, as he submitted to the skilled ministrations of the pink-palmed hands, that it was but a shadow of the Africa who had left Bristol three weeks before.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked roughly.

Averting his eyes, Africa mumbled that he had been "po'ful sick"—a fact that needed no explanation, for the black man had been prostrate for the first ten days of the voyage; but no sea-sickness accounted for the jerky movements, the slinking gait that had replaced Africa's once free and upright carriage. He had had his ears boxed more than once for dropping and breaking things; now, at Matthew's sharp exclamation, a brush clattered from his hand, fell on a basin which it shattered; Africa stood as though petrified, gaping at the shards. Losing his temper, Matthew kicked him out of the cabin.

"Your nigger's sick," Abiathar reported that evening. Matthew swore copiously; as usual, with the setting of the sun, he had started to drink his way towards oblivion of the past which avenged itself at night for his repudiation of it by day.

"Sick? Malingering!" he muttered. "Send the beggar here; I'll soon cure him of that."

Abiathar slowly shook his head.

"It ain't no good, Flood. I'm not soft-hearted—nor soft-headed: and I know a dying nigger when I see one."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"Your black won't see the coast. He's dying, if you like to put it so, o' fright."

"What's frightened him?" sneered Matthew. "By God, I'll frighten him! Let me get to him—I'll scare the fear of death into his guts. . . ."

But even his sudden self-interest had to accept the truth when he stood unsteadily over the hammock into which some of his shipmates had pitched

Africa. The man's face had gone to the colour of dark wax, and when Matthew, doubtfully, laid his hand on him he could feel a crepitation, like a continual faint shiver, under the sagging skin.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I's dying, Mars' Matthew." A mere glint showed between the quivering eyelids. "I didn't oughta come."

"Don't be a fool! You said you wanted to see your own people."

"Dey isn't my people, Mars' Matthew. I's a white man's nigguh, I don't b'long among de black folks any mo'. I b'long to Mars' Hercules way back in Bristol, an' I done bad to leave him. . . ."

"I can't knock sense into the fellow," Matthew had perforce to admit, when he rejoined Abiathar in the latter's cabin. "He talks nothing but gibberish about my grandfather; it seems as if I can't make him understand the old man's dead."

"'Tis plain enough." Abiathar wagged his head. "'Tis some o' the scallywags have been scaring him; I wouldn't say as 'twasn't done deliberate, for the sake o' spiting you. It ain't no good; when a nigger makes up his mind to die, there's no stopping him. He's feared of the Coast—and you can't do nothing, but make up your mind to look for a new nigger when you land."

It depressed Matthew strangely—this lopping off of the last remaining fragment of his old life. Stumbling back to his cabin, he had resource to his usual means of comfort.

With the falling of darkness a strange company gathered itself inside and outside his cabin. On each lift of a wave they were there: thrusting their pale, resistless faces against the ports, laughing their pale, drowned laughter, tempting him to join them in their coral palaces, full fathom five in the uncharted deep.

He figured himself, driving his body deep into that resistant ocean, that held back the secrets of its moon-governed tides, its strange inhabitants, that only the dead know. The dead—walking in grey cavalcades through the colourless caverns of the deep. The dead and the damned; he drank to them, through the black, shining glass that threw back the reflection of the swinging lanterns, wanting no company but the jolly dead, who rose in their legions to feast a companion soul, damned but not yet dead, and therefore outside their inner mysteries. And on that surf of faces, of moonbeamed forms, there was always one which, when they vanished, stayed to companion his dreams: one with the face and form of Pallas—but Pallas beautiful and damned: stripped of her foolish modesty by the clutching waves—who rose, dripping crystal from her silver breasts, to come coiling to his heart like a white sea-serpent. . . .


When they came into the tropic climate, Matthew insisted each morning on plunging into the sea, while at bows and stern four men kept watch with firing-pieces for the sea-tigers whose dark, slow-moving shapes were visible to a great depth in those clear waters. Matthew himself, on Abiathar's advice, carried in the belt about his naked middle a clasp-knife for defence, if need arose; not only sharks, but swordfish, a gash from whose serrated jaws was enough to bleed a man to death, haunted those waters. He laughed at them sometimes, kicking his way through the combers, the knife ready in his hand;

and sometimes he felt drunk with danger, as the previous night he had been drunk with wine.

It was partly to follow his dream, partly to break apart smothering night from day, that Matthew each morning shot over the gunwale—a long, brown arrow shattering the restless mirror of the sea. It was like the division between madness and sanity: a madman went into the sea, a sane man—in his own opinion—caught at the ladder dangling at the stern-works and, with a great heave of shoulder muscles, gained foothold, and presently strode along the burning decks.

To hell with ghosts and ghostly desire; there still existed a world where man could measure himself against material obstacles, where rope and iron and canvas were enemies to be conquered, a world in which ghosts counted for nothing, and gold for much.

But the day they slid Africa's body overboard, the door of the owner's cabin was not opened. Matthew was not among those who watched, with a sickening fascination, the boiling of the waters, the tiger-like rush, and heard the clash of defeated jaws. It is unlikely that any of this company was aware of the presence of an old, purple-jowled ghost in greasy olive-green small-clothes, whose growl of "Where's my slave?" was maybe carried beneath the waters to ears already free of their earthly limitations of hearing.



Book II
THE GOLD COAST

CHAPTER I

I

SHE squatted on the end of the porch, just where the sharp shadow of the awning cut purple-grey into the staring white of the sand-sifted planks: wholly occupied with her chewing-stick, while fresh palm oil sizzled on the back of her neck and shoulders. Teeth gritting into the fine fibrous lime-shoot, she continued diligently a toilette which, starting with the dawn, had gone on intermittently for the greater part of the day. What else was there to do? Her intelligence had not yet tuned in to the conversation of the other women, to that jargon of English, French, and Dutch and up-river dialect that served in the long discussions of unimportant matters that linked household with household along the waterfront. Still something of the innocence and propriety of the forest animal were hers, holding at bay the salacious hints, the grins and whispers of those who sought to make her position clear to her. She knew it, without their help, and, up to a point, accepted it; the still-raw patch behind her shoulder was a reminder of her acceptance.

When not prostrate with homesickness, she cared for her body as her mother had taught her to care for it: bathing it in the tepid creek water, oiling it until it gleamed like a polished sheath of black steel, searching minutely for imperfections, and, finding none, swathing it in the clean lengths of printed calico whose decorative possibilities she grasped more quickly than their purpose as guardians of the sanctity of her maiden charms. What need had she for modesty, who had never, until they brought her to the coast, seen an immodest action or gesture?

The chains of rough coral that swung between the pointed cups of her breasts were all that covered a resplendent young torso, erect and pliant as a coco-palm; her close-cropped hair covered a skull, immaculate in outline, with a neat black cap of rough velvet. Some of the women down there wore their hair long, but hers had not yet started to grow after its tribal cropping. She would have to grow it, they told her, after she was Mrs. Montcalm.

The bracelets of twisted copper wire and ivory, which she had worn so long that they were embedded in the satin of her upper arm, were all she had brought with her of her old life; she fingered them sometimes, and saw the Combre river, the flights of green Kiomi parrots, the butterflies broad as the span of her fingers, the long, olive-green crocodiles basking in Combre mud. Her mind registered these things more distinctly than more recent happenings; she went back to them in her dreams. *Mime ir'a Gogo*—I know that far-off place: the interlacing of palms, the cotton trees with pelicans nesting in their foaming crests, the creeks where the boys speared fish and the smell of the fires at dusk, with the hunters lying around, the women coming in and out of the huts to prepare the evening meal; her childish awe of the chief, her father, and equally childish delight when another head was added to the drying masks outside the palisade—because this meant that the men of her tribe were strong and cunning, and always victorious in battle. . . .

Here people lived and slept in boxes, seeming equally to fear the gold of

the sun and the silver of the moon. Sometimes the boxes would not open. She had split her nails to the quick, in trying to open such a one.

It was while Mr. Montcalm was away, up the river. They had locked her in, and only opened the door to push in the basins of food. When he got back she was nearly dead; they left her to curl in the sun until she got over her sickness and horror of confinement—healing like a dog, and, like a dog, looking for some sign of affection in those who nourished her. But the old woman who had looked after Mr. Montcalm's house for him was past affections; having accepted, with the philosophy of her kind, the fact that her day was nearly over, she took no notice of her successor, except intermittently, by beating and bullying, to endeavour to inculcate some of her future duties into this child of African forest, who had never kept house, never done anything, save in her own time and her own way.

It bored Sheba, to drag her long, adolescent limbs about in the wake of old Lubina, who was like a turtle, with her stone-coloured head sticking out of the stuff of her print gown. Up in Sheba's country they would have floated her down the river; here she continued to shuffle about on bare feet, to perform, in some haphazard fashion, her cooking and cleaning, and to arouse in Sheba the shrinking dislike of her people for all that is old, decadent and past its natural functions. They had not even a language of communication, since the dialect of Sheba's tribe was different from Lubina's, and she could make neither head nor tail of the "Coast English" the old woman talked.

"What's the good to Jimmy Montcalm of a nigger like that?" they were saying, down at Black Jack-anna's. "He's done, is Jimmy. What bloody good's a woman to Jimmy, anyhow? Old Lubina'll see Jimmy out."

"There ain't nothing against Jimmy fattenin' her up an' tradin' her for rum, is there? Maybe Jimmy's done with women, but he ain't the first to find out there's no mistress, for warmth or comfort, like a bottle o' English rum."

"Dat's de Lawd's troof!"

"Jimmy ain't bought that nigger for trading. He done it to spite van der Leyden, that he's been waiting to square up with ever since Van played him off that plugged-up batch he couldn't sell to Marchant of the *Perseus*. Van's woman's gone sick with the yaws; he wanted that black girl—bad."

"That why Jimmy cut Isogo up for playing around with his nigger? And refused ten gold bars offered him by Sanby? You can buy plenty rum with ten gold bars!"

"I lay Sanby got them bars at Anamaboe!"

"Ay, he was there through the rains." A laugh went up, for Anamaboe gold was the most villainously adulterated on the Gold Coast.

"Anamaboe gold 'ud buy Jimmy enough rum to soak himself for twelve months. And by that time there'd be no more Jimmy. Poor old Jimmy. The Coast's surely had its value out of Jimmy."

"And the Company. I lay there's more meat gone out of Jimmy's than any place between here and Calabar."

"Who says Jimmy refused ten gold bars?"

"He says so."

"Jimmy's a bloody fine liar—and it's a bloody fine nigger."

"And why the hell should Jimmy have the monopoly? If he ain't for selling, why not share her? I lay by now he's repented of his refusal—or will,

as soon as the noggin's empty. And if he won't share—what about it, lads? I'll stake my soul most of the present company's done worse in its time than rob a dead man."

"Jimmy ain't dead—and, speaking personal, I'd sooner deal with Jimmy dead than Jimmy living."

"Get Black Jack-anna on the job."

The last suggestion turned all heads towards the counter, behind which sat the president goddess of this eclectic assembly—the butt of a cigar stuck between her lips of black rubber, a length of red cotton twisted round her head and gold rings in her ears, swinging with the curiously supple movements of a short thick neck that swelled into the tremendous spread of breasts like bolsters. The sweat running from the low, vicious brow made of her bosom a glistening jelly; her eyes, like berries sunk in topaz glue, followed each stage of the progress one of her mulatto girls was making with a drunken soldier.

There was no phase of local ill-doing in which Black Jack-anna did not have her finger. For a quarter of a century she had waxed fat on the encouragement of vice, and her contempt for the white race knew no bounds. She knew she was in bad odour with the Governor, and, metaphorically speaking, spread out her fingers at him. If Black Jack-anna said a thing could be worked, well and good; if she vetoed it, it was something worse than a waste of time and trouble. It was said she had a witch-doctor uncle in the interior, whose services had more than once been pressed into the service of her shady schemes. A quadroon with a yellow-brown face of infinite disillusionment bent forward to whisper in the last speaker's ear.

"Ain't no good, mistuh. Jack-anna, she won' touch not'ing to do wit' Mistuh Mon'ca'm."

"Why so?" The tone showed that even a Coast waster considered he had, as a white man, the right to despise one of mixed blood.

"Ain't I said, many a time, Jimmy's blood brother to the devil?" scoffed another, too drunk to be discreet.

"'Caise of her own sistuh-in-law, dat's bin Mon'ca'm's woman a long time."

"Pshaw. It's a matter o' luck who sees the other out."

"Dat's why," whispered the quadroon. "Mon'ca'm, he promise Lubina he kill her, ef any'ting happens to dat girl. An' Jack-anna—she don' wan' Lubina for to die. No, suh—not yet! 'Caise dat ole woman, she's got plenty money, tuck away somewhere: but nobuddy don' know where she tuck it. No good kill her till dey fin' out—eh?"

... Sheba knew nothing of such conversations. At home, by now, she would have been married off to one of the young warriors who, in the days of her tribe's supremacy, had acknowledged her father's leadership, and would proudly have fulfilled her destiny as breeder of fighting men to defend their village against the Togo and Fantee enemy. Conscious, as a young animal is conscious, of a primeval urge, she made some innocent overtures to a youth of her own race, a canoe boy at the factory, who promptly reciprocated her ardour.

Never, never while life was in her, would she forget the consequences of this un consummated idyll: the crack of the whip as it coiled round her unprotected

ribs, the last despairing shriek of her lover as he paid the unspeakable penalty for his interference with his master's property. The same night she was branded, and, lightly as the operation was performed—for even possessive jealousy hesitated to inflict permanent blemish on that flawless flesh—the truth penetrated to her soul: that there was no return, for her, to the forest; not even vicarious return, through union with one of her own race. She was Mr. Montcalm's, and had to wait her master's moment for deliverance from her burden of aching and amorous virginity.

The quick dusk was falling, and the shrill hum of mosquitoes replaced the buzz of the flies which swarmed in the sunlight over the offal heaps. A pungent smell of food came from the barracoons, where the glow of furnaces proclaimed the hour of the evening meal. She would have liked to have eaten down at the barracoons, in the company of her kind, where, squatting on her haunches, plunging her hand into the hot mess of pork and beans, there was hope of catching a familiar accent, of hearing some news of her far-off, defeated people. The rich smell of Muscovy lard, of palm-oil and malaguetta was the smell of her people; each night she sickened with despair as the wind carried it along the beach, with, sometimes, the noise of laughter and singing: for the resilient temperament of the negro quickly responds to physical comfort, and the past and the future are forgotten when bellies are full and there is room to sing and sleep. I know that far-off place. . . . The barracoons must be full to-night, for twenty canoes had come down the river.

With the elastic movement of unconscious and perfect muscular co-ordination, she came slowly to her feet, and stole to the reed curtain that covered the door: Mr. Montcalm's door, where, having lunched, as usual, from the bottle, he had taken refuge in repose from the curse of the heat. Bending forward, she listened: not knowing that the glare of the setting sun, projecting her shadow on the curtain, had betrayed her.

"Come here, you damned shadow—you cursed black image! Come and fan the flies away."

She lifted the reed curtain and stood there, still, apprehensive, attentive. Perhaps Mr. Montcalm had got over his sickness; perhaps at this moment she was to become Mrs. Montcalm. That would mean, according to what they told her, a red gown and gold rings in her ears; but it would also mean, she had come to understand through Lubina's demonstrations, the performance of many disagreeable tasks, for which she had not the least taste or desire. She was sorely tempted to run away. Her lithe brown beauty hovered between shadow and light, her young breasts lifted on a caught breath, the silver line of her teeth shone between her parted lips, and in her eyes was always their forest darkness, the nostalgia for her own kind and their simple, idle ways—so much more comprehensible than the demands made by a white master on an African girl's intelligence.

The sick man hoisted himself on his elbow, to gloat on this rich possession which, so far, he had never been in fit state to enjoy.

"Two women in the house, and I'm as neglected as a dead cat on a dung-heap. God's teeth, haven't you niggers got any bowels?"

She knew he was angry, and pouted. Flies came zooming into the broad band of light released by the lifting of the curtain; she blinked, the shining flesh of her shoulder twitched as one settled, but she went reluctantly forward.

Her nostrils shrank from the "white" smell of the room, its thin, sour rankness, in comparison with the rich odour of her own kind. She did not want to touch or be touched; she did not want to become Mrs. Montcalm. To her eyes, Montcalm seemed very old; his teeth, yellowed and worn to stumps, his thin, grey hair, his emaciated and excoriated body were to her, who knew nothing of the effects of the climate on a white man's constitution, signs of extreme age. And the horror of old age was in her blood; her flesh crawled with it.

"Get the fan and beat these pestilential flies off my head."

The gesture, rather than the words, telling her what was wanted, she picked up the broken palm-leaf fan that lay on the floor, and struck at the black, evil flies, whose bodies cracked like pebbles on the dry leaf. Having waved the fan once or twice, with the languor of disinclination, she let it drop again, as indifferently as a dog might drop a tasteless bone, and stood on one foot, the other caressing her shin, scowling at her master, who seemed amused by this childish petulance.

"You'd sooner lie here and be fanned yourself—is that it, my black princess? Ay, your sort isn't made for domestication," he muttered with satisfaction. "Maybe it was that that captured me. . . . What have you been about to-day, eh?" His wrist, slack with fever, hooked her knee towards him, his other hand explored the smooth, longed-for flesh.

Since his up-river trip, fever and dysentery had played havoc with him, he was still as weak as a rat. It would not have mattered, but for Sheba.

Montcalm had not been dealing in negroes for twenty years without learning to distinguish the gold from the base metal. For some reason he had not fallen into the error of other traders, in regarding everything that came down-river as common cattle.

At a glance he had seen in the narrow-flanked young female something that set her apart from her companions—as a horsedealer may see in a leggy foal a future classic winner. His were no fine perceptions, he saw nothing of the dark pride that belongs to the higher inhabitants of the forest; he only saw that she brought to her captivity a stubborn aloofness, instead of the whines, grimaces and bestial terror of her companions. She was insolent where they were craven, and her insolence, together with the beauty of her form, roused in him emotions which he would have sneered at, had they been attributed to him. It was long since he had experienced any sensation, even the most primitive, in connection with a negress, but the girl set him on fire.

And not him alone. It gave him exquisite delight to snatch her from under their noses—those blacks and whites who, like dogs around a bitch on heat, snuffed up the fragrance of her midnight flesh and came sneaking round afterwards with their offers. He laughed at them; but it was their jealousy and their desire which lifted the affair on to a different plane from that which, as a rule, supported such relationships on the Gold Coast.

He would have been content—almost—to have kept her as one keeps a tame and highly bred domestic beast, simply for pride of possession; for twenty years of the Coast had purged and burned out of him most of his interest in the female sex; but as time went on, he discovered, to his downfall, that even his parched-up senses were not proof against the attack of her youth, her overwhelming, lush femininity.

Well, the Coast would not have much more fun out of him, thought Jimmy acidly; but, by God, before he was finished, he meant to show them all——!

"I'll lay you've not been down to the barracoons again, my tigress. By God, I'll flay you alive if I catch you tinkering with that black trash again."

She wriggled herself free of the unpleasant contact, and returned to the door. Her dark silhouette, cut against the tropic sunset, ravished his senses; the delicate hardness of that ebony outline was like a challenge and a mockery to his miserable state. The heat was dying; he staggered to his feet, and, dragging with him the sweat-drenched sheet that covered his nakedness, lurched to her side.

"Sick I may be; but not too sick to show you and your sort to whom you belong!"

With a blow, whose suddenness, and not its violence, achieved his purpose, a blow of dark, defeated, sexual exasperation, he struck the slack, leaning figure to the ground.

She lay there, placid; more contented to be prone than upright, indifferent to the blow as to its bestower; but occupied in some vague, distant cell of her memory with the customs of her tribe: with a certain water that on several occasions had rid her mother of some of her more troublesome relations.

II

Four bells; and the sky on the port beam went up in flames that caught the shrouds and blazoned them with all the saffron, coral and cornelian dyes of dawn on a wide spread of empty ocean. The *Cassiopæia* rose and fell in the troughs of the mild, white-crested waves, while the last stars faded and the moon became a faint sickle of silver in the western sky.

There was the roadstead, crowded with shipping, and a long, sandy beach, pounded with surf, into which native canoes launched themselves with uncanny dexterity; and along the beach, between it and a palm-jagged horizon, a low-built town of white-fronted, one-storied houses. Early as it was, the beach swarmed with life; the *Cassiopæia's* seven-gun salute had brought out all the inhabitants, and the thin, clear air, which, like a telescope, enhanced the vision, made it possible, even at that distance from shore, to distinguish the men from the women. The bulwarks on the port side were crowded with spectators, who, having nothing better to do than wait for the tide to carry them across the bar, had for the most part, one thought in their heads. They had been nine weeks at sea, and had not seen a woman.

For this very reason, the crew was kept busy; the small and low sails were hauled up, the fore topsail braced to the mast; the *Cassiopæia* shed her glory, like a flower at sunset, like a butterfly furled upon a leaf. While half the crew was aloft, thumping and pounding the canvases into their lashings, the rest was hard at work, roofing in the decks with the awnings of matting. Within an hour the heat would be intolerable; clothing was already reduced to breech-clouts, men sweated and panted under the curse of the sun, the red glare of anticipation in their eyes. Landing meant grog, and for grog every man aboard would have bartered his hopes of salvation.

Playing for prudence, rather than a quick passage, the *Cassiopæia*, after

parting with her convoy off the Portuguese coast, had made away westwards, with decks cleared and men appointed their stations in case of engaging the enemy. A few greenhorns who had started to whisper that life aboard a slaver wasn't as black as it was painted received their disillusionment. With the Iberian peninsula well astern the rations were shortened and the water allowance reduced to three pints a day. The temper of the ship suffered accordingly, and was not improved by the report that in the captain's quarters there was no liquor shortage. A morning session at the grids became part of the ship's routine and any handy implement was used for the maintenance of discipline among a disgruntled and disorderly crew.

There was an attempt at mutiny when it leaked out that they were passing Madeira: Crown having decided to keep as far from the coast as possible until they were off Three-Point Cape. He knew his crew and was not risking a brush with pirates. He dealt briefly and bloodily with the mutiny, which cost him three lives: a cheap price, as any slave captain would say, for keeping his ship in order. A sullen, sickening and half-starved crew brought the *Cassiopeia* into the Gulf of Benin—half a dozen of them strung up at the gratings, getting over the effects of flogging and Chian pepper, another gone mad with thirst, in irons. There was also the case of the fellow who leapt through one of the lower gun ports to end his misery in the bellies of the sharks who, like shadows of doom, had followed the ship from Fogo. Beautiful and damned, the *Cassiopeia* furled her sails, and prepared to receive more victims.

The waist and quarterdeck were stripped, save for the bulkheads separating the two, and the between-decks stank of fumigation—Abiathar being one of the few captains who believed prevention to be better than cure. "Men aft, women forward," he explained laconically to the passengers who, its being their first, and in most cases, their last trip across the ocean, followed him on his tour of inspection. "It'll be a sty from the time we ship the first load, but 'tain't anything but healthy for the beggars to come into."

"How many do you reckon to carry, mister—captain?" The blue flame of Abiathar's eye called the speaker to order on his address.

"Orner'ly speaking, we got room for five hundred; but we're shorter of space than we'll be on the next trip. With the wars on, 'tain't so easy to put back for trading stuffs, so I took on extra cargo. We've engaged ourselves for two hundred and fifty full-grown males an' up to eighty females; not countin' odds an' ends o' children an' infants in arms that's hardly worth the shipping. But even niggers are human. Take the babbies from their breasts an' the beggars pine away; that's ten pun loss to the owner. 'Sides, there's a market for 'em; some of these fine West Indian dames won't be seen on the streets, without a black boy walking behind."

"Well, you'd best make the best use of your time!" sniggered one of the spotty-faced company that walked at his heels. "Abolition'll take a nice cut out o' seafaring profits, from what one hears back in London."

"Abolition ain't going to do nothing of the sort—neither in this century nor the next," prophesied Abiathar. "By Christmas! Is the commerce o' the country going to be governed by a pack o' Methodees an' old maids? I'll tell ye something"—he halted in his stride, to turn upon his audience with a minatory wag of the forefinger—"I'll tell ye what Abolition'll mean—

if them meddlesome gentry had the wits to see it. Abolition spells smuggling, and smuggling spells nought but red hell for the poor cattle driven below, instead o' having the liberty o' the decks. You seen our accommodation, gentlemen—an' you seen the provision made for the comfort an' health o' the cargo. So long as slaving's lawful an' above board, them conditions 'll last; for the owners know unhealthy cargo's dead loss. But if the law starts to meddle, mark my words, there'll be a change. The traffic won't stop, because we're dependent on it; but shipbuilders an' masters 'll find ways an' means o' circumventing the law, and then—ay, *then* the Abolitionists 'll have something to squeal about, and," added Abiathar piously, "Lord help the poor bloody niggers squashed like flies in the 'olds of ships that's built for speed an' not for convenience. And there'll be plenty o' squealing among the owners as well, for you can't make profit out of cargo two-thirds sick an' a third dead or dying from overcrowding."

"What about the traders?" someone mumbled.

Abiathar winked.

"That'll be the time for 'em to take a cut out o' their rum rations an' save up the price o' the passage home," he said dryly. A bitter laugh broke out.

"Who the hell's got a home——?"

As though this remark cut uncomfortably close to the bones of reality, another voice asked hastily when they would be able to land.

"We cross the bar on the midday tide, and there's no going ashore until formalities is accomplished. They'll send their boats out, and we got to pay anchorage an' send over presents for the King an' his Grand Panjandrum: ten gallons o' liquor for His Majesty an' one of them smaller barrels for the Chief. After that, gentlemen, you can go ashore—an' judge for yourself the superiority o' Gold Coast society over that you've enjoyed on the way out."

He saluted his company curtly and passed on to the afterdeck, where were piled in readiness the baskets and bales of goods for trading: the linens, perpetuanas, chintzes, tapseils and nicanoes in which Gold Coast bucks and belles delighted to array themselves: the Venice bugles, corals, the glass beads and contacarbe that represented currency among the natives for the flesh of their enemies. Shining piles of pewter basins, knotted together with ropes of straw, hampers of cowries and vast heterogeneous piles representing the rococo taste of native potentates were guarded by armed sailors from the pilfering of the crew. Since a handful of bugles was worth favours each was eager to purchase, there was a good deal of slinking round the piles, and despite the firing pieces, some bargains were concluded, although not when the captain was around.

Abiathar cast his lowering glance round the decks: the glance of a lion-tamer, slow, heavy, compelling—satisfied. Under the climbing sun the *Cassiopæia* became a cage of prowling beasts, but so far as his ship was concerned, nothing in the past, nor anything that was to come, afforded him an instant's perturbation. Of one thing at least the fallow years had not robbed him: of his confidence in himself, in his power and right as a ship's master. He could no more have doubted himself, his own judgments, than he could have doubted the proven strength of his brawny muscles, that won him the respect of those too witless to accept moral authority. Unlimited courage, an equal capacity for brutality and rough good humour, total lack of imagina-

tion allied to a curiously sensitive awareness of undercurrents had given him his mastership over the basest and most brutal of human beings, as a certain crude cunning had gained him superiority over minds on a par with his own. He had that love of his trade which is implicit in success, and he was glad in every drop of his blood to be back in the world of water and ships to which he belonged. A king overlooking his kingdom could have felt no more deeply content than Abiathar, looking towards that pale line of coast which he had not seen for too long a term of years.

Along the deck, behind him, came a great, nude figure, dripping water from its limbs of blackened mahogany. Abiathar did not approve of Matthew's morning swim; like the majority of sailors, he could not swim himself, and regarded as lunacy the craze for total immersion of the body. While Matthew stood in the sun, being rubbed down by the sailor whose services had replaced those of Africa, Abiathar grumbled out one of his daily protests.

"As for cleansing myself that way—as soon put me body in a sewer. Water's an unwholesome element, whether for the inner or the outer man; it destroys all the natural juices of the body that keeps it sane an' hearty."

"It may be hearty," grinned Matthew, "but to my way of thinking it's deucedly uncomfortable to be encrusted with sweat; apart from the offence to one's more refined senses!"

"Get rid o' yer refinement an' keep yer sweat," was Abiathar's blunt recommendation. "It's like varnish against the poisons in the air. Do ye know, in this climate, iron corrodes in less time than it takes to clean that gun? What'll it do to yer guts, if that's its power over the hardest o' metals? Unseal yer pores, an' ye destroy yer finest protection, not only against fevers, but against them pestilent flies that battens on human flesh. You ain't met the Gold Coast mosquito yet, cock, but you'll think on my words when you've got half a hundred of 'em on ye at once, suckin' yer blood!"

Despite the excesses in drinking which he had indulged ever since coming aboard, Matthew had never felt harder or better in his life. It was, he supposed, part of the damned contrariety of nature that his body should wax in strength as his mind sickened. True that every ounce of superfluous flesh had burnt itself away from his enormous frame; but this was due as much to the violent methods he had employed to counteract the tedious inactivity of life on shipboard as to the gnawing misery of his thoughts.

At midday they crossed the bar, and dropped anchor in water so pellucidly clear that the wavering lines of the cables were visible from coupling to the ocean bed, and the shadows of fish weaving and darting under the hull made a restless pattern on the pale sand.

But for the heat it seemed paradise; behind the huts or houses stretched a belt of emerald that met the edge of the hard blue sky with an almost audible impact of contrasting colour; there was great yelling and shouting on the now crowded beach, as more and more figures broke from the houses and came running down to dance and wave their hands towards the ship. A grotesque frieze of leaping black figures made a dark edge to the fringes of the surf, as a long canoe, manned by coal-black rowers, shot out of the breakers. An answering cheer went up from the decks of the *Cassiopaia*, where crew and passengers girded at the delay.

CHAPTER II

I

THE heat was diabolical; it crouched like a tiger along the beach, it reeled like a tiger, it hummed like plucked wire with a horror of flies that rose in clouds from the offal heaps and zoomed upon the newcomers with the triumph of vampires, deserting the old, dried husks of their former victims for living flesh. New colour, new sound, new smell vanished in a buzzing, a stinging, a sheer torture of irritation that made one tear at face, neck and hands; iridescent brutes the size of horseflies fastened on one's nose and shot their needlepoints of poison through the woven tissue, leaving blood-splotches like freckles when beaten off, or remaining to gorge themselves until they dropped with repletion. It was Matthew's initiation into one of the curses of the Gold Coast, and his sufferings were not lessened by observing that the inhabitants, whether black or white, seemed to be unaffected by the scourge.

A ring of grinning, curious, in some way sub-human faces formed a fringe to the cluster of whites, or near-whites, who claimed priority in welcoming their own race. As the rowers, leaping waist-deep in the creamy backwash, hauled the canoes up above the surf-line, Matthew had time to remark that, as a committee of reception, it was not impressive; yellowed skins, abominable teeth, skin eruptions, and erubescence of chronic alcoholism witnessed to conditions which the charitable might put down to the climate, but in which a less simple observer would read the cause, as well as the effect, of their owners' present situation.

"You come out here to rot. You find your way here from natural causes, or your family sends you because it's ashamed of you and wants to forget your existence. What's it matter? It comes to the same in the long run: malaria, Black Jack-anna's, nigger girls—and a hole in the hogyard"—the local colloquialism for the patch of over-used earth into which were casually shovelled, from time to time, the remains of one more Gold Coast victim.

A few sturdy survivors, who had the air of being pickled in alcohol, stood grinning, as the boatloads debarked; they wore what amounted to a uniform on that part of the coast—long, loose coats of traders' cotton over dingy white slacks, belted casually about their naked middles; their eyes were shaded with broad, palm-leaf hats. The few who had sartorial pretensions were clothed in the sun-bleached remnants of military uniform, patched under the armpits with stuff that resembled coarse sacking. The cigar was in every one's mouth, black or white.

"We're getting off before sunset," muttered Abiathar, as they clambered over the gunwale. "This ain't but a ceremonial call—a sort o' acclimatizin' visit, if you like to put it that way. The big chap smokin' the calabash is the Governor: the best man we've got along this coast. You'll meet other governors, that 'ull receive you in full fig, as if they was royalty, and make as much palaver as ambassadors. Pleydoll saves that stuff for the native big-wigs; he can make as much show as any of 'em, when it suits his purpose;

but to folks like us he'll talk as straight as you or I'd talk across the Dolphin bar, and he's got more hold on the military than their own officers."

Cordial greetings received them; black hands as well as white were thrust out to welcome the travellers, and Matthew's height and the outlandish elegance of his attire made an impression, not wholly sympathetic, upon the rank and file. One or two turned aside to spit—thus symbolizing their independence of cock-a-hoop young owners, coming out to patronize the Coast. Others shrugged their shoulders. "Let Africa deal with *him*," their gesture seemed to say—and several slouched away, to take stock of the other passengers, who, with their baggage, were struggling to escape from the glare of the foreshore.

"Captain Raikes, of the fort; Mr. Crawshaw and Mr. Mceeks, from Anamaboe; Mr. Pilgrim of Endor"—the Governor grunted the introductions. He had a coarsely good-humoured face, pock-marked to the lips, and eyeballs yellow as tobacco-juice; his little eyes twinkled upon Matthew, as though he found something amusing about the presence of this strapping product of civilization in his community. For all that, he had about him an air of authority which Matthew was quick to feel. "Father Cleery, who looks after our immortal souls—and James Montcalm, the oldest inhabitant. Men may come and men may go, but our Jimmy goes on for ever. Ain't that so, Jimmy?"

The pleasantry awoke no response from the one addressed. Montcalm was the only one not to offer his hand; he kept them both in his pockets, jerking his head in recognition of the introduction, while his pale, unsteady eye returned Matthew's glance with a certain sardonic calculation. He was just over a drinking bout, and the aftermath of the bottle was, as all his friends knew, a sort of insolence, to which Jimmy was always prepared to give expression with his gun. Matthew said lightly:

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Montcalm. I'll call on your experience, if I find myself in difficulties in your neighbourhood."

The emaciated lower jaw jerked the cigar-butt up towards the speaker's narrowed eye, as Montcalm answered dryly:

"You might do worse."

"Jimmy's as deep as the devil, and his name stinks from here to Calabar," Matthew was later to be told. "But there ain't another factor like him, and he's got the native kings and such-like under his thumb."

"Come up to the house," the Governor was saying, "and slake your thirst. The flies are troubling you?" He chuckled, as though this were part of the jest of living on the Gold Coast. You'll get used to them. You'll join us, Montcalm? There ain't much to offer you in the way of entertainment, Mr. Flood, but maybe the novelty of the surroundings'll make up for that."

Two tall fellows stepped forward with umbrellas; under their shade the Governor and Matthew headed the slow procession to the fort. The blacks who followed them from the boats, carrying the presents which Abiathar had brought for the Europeans, were magnificent specimens; stark naked except for the loincloth, the sun ran over their oiled bodies in waves of dark light.

"Eboes, that lot," remarked the Governor. "Best workmen on the coast; you can train 'em like dogs."

The degenerate skull of the negro was placed, in most instances, on Praxitelean torsos; the Governor's eye was on them, like a shepherd counting his sheep. Matthew's glance involuntarily shifted to one of the soldiers, a lad

of no more than twenty or twenty-two years, with a century of vice engraved in his furtive young face and weak, stringy body.

"I know what you're thinking." Pleydell was evidently as quick as his guest at observation. "What the devil's one to do? I've been five years at the fort, and I've preached till I'm sick. You can't get our men to lay off the liquor. You can't drive it into their thick heads that the climate's death in itself, without rotting their guts with native women. They take example from their superiors"—he shrugged his shoulders—"but they've not got the wit to see the difference between keeping a black woman to see to your cleanliness and comfort, and sleeping with the whores at Black Jack-anna's. The women themselves aren't to blame. There's no sexual morality, as it's known in England, among the blacks—though, in their own villages, they're as virtuous as Quakers. They only follow their natures—and it's the ruin of our men."

Seeking some comparison with the specimen he had seen in the Llandoger Trow, Matthew was disappointed in the females; with a few exceptions, they seemed of a lower breed than their men. Distorted with manual labour and with the suckling of infants, they inspired him with little but repulsion, and he failed to imagine himself, or any man of sensibility, trafficking with such creatures.

Ignoring the pot-bellied infants who straggled about his knees—evincing a familiarity with the Governor which the latter seemed in no way to find embarrassing—and a few lewd gestures of invitation from the younger women, he found himself before one of the low, wooden houses that constituted the main architecture of the fort. As the Governor's residence, it was much larger than the rest, and was surrounded by a broad veranda, over which jutted the long roof, thatched with palm leaves and dried grass. A clump of soaring coco-palms took away the bareness of the façade, but afforded no shade to the flight of wooden steps, on either side of which a soldier presented arms at their approach.

Amicably footing a few more rolling infants out of the way, the Governor led them from blaring heat into a comparative coolness; the plaited mats, through which the light came green as West Country Spring, had been freshly doused with water, and although the place swarmed with flies they were not the gluttoned dragons of the waterfront. Two native boys, who had been asleep on the floor of trodden earth, started to pull the thongs of the big leather fans suspended from the ceiling, causing, if not a draught, at least a movement of air. Another towering Eboe houseboy brought, at his master's orders, a mixture of vinegar and limejuice, with which the visitors were advised to smear their bites. The table was spread with all the liquor the place could produce, with the somewhat exotic addition of a big stone jar of marmalade and a loaf of white bread.

"I'd ask you to eat, but I ain't got a woman at the moment, and my other cattle can't prepare a dish that's palatable for visitors. Fill your glasses, gentlemen, and we'll drink to England, home and—the beauty that, you'll have observed, Mr. Flood, it's wiser to forget!"

The warm, sticky Madeira wine flowed into the tumblers; at the first taste of it Matthew wanted to vomit, but the others drank it with a gusto that betrayed their forgetfulness of better liquor.

It was all very masculine, free and agreeable; it was not at all Matthew's

idea of the Gold Coast, as gleaned from Abiathar's descriptions. For all the friendliness, however, there was a shade of reserve, as though each man waited upon his cue to say what really was in his mind; and this Matthew ascribed to the Governor's presence, which, for all its negligent geniality, imposed a certain convention on the assembly. He was conscious, too, of eyes and ears that took shrewd stock of his own personality, while their owners were seemingly engrossed in conversations. At the end of an hour he had come to the conclusion that, besides the Governor there was only one man who counted for anything in that odd community: James Montcalm.

II

"You'd better luck than the *Ark*! Came in last month with her mainmast shot away and honeycomb in her bows. Got taken by the French off Barbary and then had a fight with the prize crew. Nearly foundered on her way down, and now she's at 'Mina, patching up; they say it'll be six months before she's fit to take the water again."

They were supping on board the ship; Montcalm, on Abiathar's invitation, had accompanied them—Abiathar refusing, mainly on Matthew's account, to stay ashore after the death-dealing dew had started to fall. The three men, their heads turned towards the port, over which, like a flat white plate in the sky, hung the hard, bright African moon, filled the cabin with the smoke of their pipes. The lamp rocked gently in its gimbals with the almost imperceptible movement of the anchored ship; out of doors an incredible silence enfolded the coast and the lights that twinkled from the fort. At least four days of inactivity lay ahead, while the complicated and expensive formalities that governed the business of trading were concluded.

During the meal Matthew learned more about the slave trade than he had gathered from six months of Abiathar's disquisitions; he had also learned to regard Montcalm with a dislike that seemed wholly groundless, since the latter recovered his manners with his sobriety, and his attitude to Matthew was, if anything, fulsomely agreeable.

"We ain't seen the enemy since we left Finistère, but if we have the same luck going back, 't'll be a miracle. The sooner we load up and get away the better it'll suit my plans—as don't finish with a trip to the islands."

The factor nodded, his lips tightening on the stem of his pipe.

"What's in the barracoons?" pursued Abiathar.

"There's another lot coming in any day; you'll do better to reserve your picking till the canoes come down."

"Ay? What is it?" Abiathar's eyes narrowed. "Cra-cra?—or a little understanding with our friends out there?" He nodded towards the dimly visible riding lights of the slaver, which had beaten them in by twenty-four hours.

Montcalm grinned, showing his broken teeth.

"The *Waterspout* was in ten days ago, and had the pick of the last lot. Still, there's some that wasn't conditioned and have come on since. They get their two messes a day and enough exercise to limber 'em. Maybe there's a dozen, worth ten pound a head—"

"Who to?" Abiathar's fist struck scornfully on the table. "By Christmas!

And the charter party gets ten an' the owners the same in guineas. Where do I come in, at ten pun' a head?"

Montcalm winked at Matthew, who returned the glance expressionlessly from the corners of his eyes.

"Prices ain't what they were, I know. You can pick up a good plantation nigger for five pounds, any day, in the islands. Which doesn't interest you, Cap'n—nor you, Mr. Flood. I'll have a hundred down by the week-end; there's a war on between Fantee and Omo, and the King of Omo's got three hundred prisoners. We're fetching 'em down as fast as we can."

Abiathar's brows creased.

"I'll take a look at the barracoons; we can get on to Whidah and back, while you're conditioning the rest."

"As you please. But it'll pay you not to hurry. Your friend Captain Bentley's been here five weeks and they're still haggling over coomey, taxes and what-not. *Waterspout* wanted five hundred; left with a hundred and fifty—and they got the last ounce of trading stuff out of her before she went. The King's holding I.O.U.s of Jackson's against his return."

"Ain't they got pawns?"

"Seven or eight; one of 'em's Omo's nephew. A lot he cares. The fact is, the supply's running short, and Omo's a good business man; means to make profit out of it."

"Devil take him! What's come over the rascal?"

"I've seen this coming a long time. His Majesty's always been a plaguey customer: touchy about his standing and jealous as an old maid of his rivals. At the moment he's got it into his wooden head he isn't treated with enough respect by the visiting captains, and he's sulking up-country, sending his capparshers down for coomey and making his own terms."

"What's the use of the military," asked Matthew, "if they can't deal with that?"

"The fort's here to protect trade, sir, not to enforce it. If Omo won't trade, we can't make him. An unofficial raid on his town might wake him up, but it wouldn't improve our position. You can't do anything with a scared nigger; moreover, the fellow isn't vicious. It's a sheer matter of vanity; he wants to get even with Dahomey, who's a different proposition."

"It sounds to me more like a situation for diplomacy than aggression." Matthew smiled.

"That's what I've tried to persuade Bentley. He won't agree to Omo's terms and Omo won't accept his. There's a deadlock over a matter of eighty bars and some kegs of gunpowder Omo swears Bentley owes him from the last trip. Bentley says he paid the gunpowder and gave the King enough dash to get him free trade for the rest of his life."

"Wouldn't it pay us to square Omo and get away with the goods while they're haggling?" Matthew's eyes twinkled at the prospect; it was just the kind of business—half astute, half rascally—he enjoyed handling. Abiathar's lips thrust doubtfully through the fiery bush of his beard.

"Pends what squaring Omo means."

"It means," said the factor, knocking the dottle out of his pipe and coming to his feet, "an up-river trip and a full-fig visit to Omo; with enough dash to load a couple of canoes——"

"Thank 'ee," said Abiathar. "That's the kind o' pleasure trip I leave to them as fancies it." He lowered his head to siffle up the remainder of his drink.

"How long would the trip take?"

Matthew's eyes met Montcalm's, and there was a look in the latter's that reminded him suddenly of a snake's: a cold, expressionless watchfulness of unblinking lids.

"A week there and a week back; allowing for the palaver, you could count it a month. It's not a trip to be recommended to a stranger to these parts and climate." Matthew got the impression that the carelessness was deliberate, was feigned to increase his own interest, and his instinct prompted a recoil. The laugh he gave was convincingly frank and indifferent.

"Bentley's lot meanwhile getting through their squabble and making off with the goods, eh?" He shook his head, as though dismissing the topic.

"More likely giving it up as a bad job and putting out to sea again," said Montcalm quickly. "There's plenty of stuff to be picked up at Whidah and the smaller forts, without haggling over coomey with Omo."

"Then why waste time?"

"Because Fantees fetch better prices than any of our local cattle—except the Eboes, that go down to Cape Coast; and because Bentley's got it into his head he won't be beaten by a nigger. I don't blame him. If nobody makes a stand we'll lose our trade. In comparison with forts like Accra and Anamaboe we've never held a very strong position, and unless we can improve it the Company'll be closing down the station one day and handing over our business to Fort James—that's our nearest competitor. I've got to get back." His shaking hand—he had started on another fever bout—reached out for Matthew's; the latter felt it, thin and cold as a bird's claw. "I'll give myself the pleasure of having you to dine one night, gentlemen; but not till I've made sure the larder's in good fettle!"

As the canoe started back along the track of the moonlight, Abiathar turned on his companion.

"You're taking no up-river trips to square Omo! Ay, you needn't tell me what's at the back of your mind. If Omo won't trade, or if he starts to run us up on duty, we'll go on: if need be, as far as Bonny river."

"And forfeit a hundred prime niggers? We shall not!"

Abiathar regarded him with the slow exasperation of the experienced man.

"Mr. Flood. You may be owner of this ship, but I'm her master, and, as such, responsible for her well-being until she docks in Seamill. Do you think I'm leaving my ship to take care of herself while we pay diplomatic calls on Omo? To hell with Omo. I'll wait a week, and if we ain't come to terms—*our* terms, not a thieving nigger's—we're going up the coast, to see what Dahomey'll do for us."

"Do as you please. I'm staying here, to deal with Omo."

"You'll go up-country—alone?" A snort of incredulity and contempt expressed Abiathar's opinion of this manoeuvre.

"I can command some sort of escort, I suppose? It's Pleydell's business to see to that. And it's obviously what Montcalm has in his mind."

Abiathar groaned.

"Haven't I told you to 'ware Jimmy? Jimmy ain't human; the very

tarantulas turn away from him by now—they've lost confidence! The jungle itself is scared o' Jimmy; it's played all the tricks it knows on him and it can't beat him down. For every trick it knows, Jimmy's got another. Death 'ull have to come barefooted to catch Jimmy Montcalm."

"Others may also have tricks, as you call them."

"Meaning yourself?" Abiathar chuckled grimly. "Don't talk childish, cock. You think because you can knock a man down with the back of yer hand that nothing can touch you—is that it? Wait till you've had a few more days here: till the marrow in yer bones starts to melt and you think there's a red-hot iron behind each of yer eyes; till yer teeth start rattling like castanets in the fingers of a Spanish gipsy and the sweat pours from yer body like the fat from a joint roasting before the fire. Them's the joys you've got before you. For I make no doubt yer pig-headed disposition 'ull reject the precautions I force even on the crew. You'll not wear the dressed hare's skin next yer bare stomach, eh? 'Twas old John Barbot's maxim, and many's the time I've blessed him for it. Well, it takes a wise man to accept advice, and if it take more'n a fortnight o' Gold Coast climate to l'arn ye wisdom, I'll eat my hat."

"As I have a taste for coming by my own wisdom, that's my affair," was the cold retort. "As a gambler, I've also a fancy for choosing my own terms." In this mood, as Abiathar had learned to his cost, Matthew was equal to challenging hell to do its worst.

"It'll be Africa, and not you, cock, that'll choose the terms," he said slowly. "And make no mistake: there ain't a cunninger adversary, nor one more tricky with the dice. Fifteen years now I've known Africa; one might say we've come to a fair understanding. That's to say, I know enough to respect my superior, and where to stop short in the takin' o' liberties."

"No doubt, as a matter of common sense, you're in the right," interrupted Matthew. "But what you choose to risk and what I choose to risk are different matters. You're responsible to others besides myself; I'm responsible to none. If, therefore, I venture farther than you, it is my own affair; the blame—or the credit—rests with me, and no one can hold you to account for it."

"The fellow that takes risks in the name o' necessity's a hero; the one that does it for amusement's a fool."

Matthew scowled over this, knowing it was not to be rated as the counsel of a milksop.

"It's all very well for you. The life you lead provides you with enough risk to absolve you of seeking it apart from your duties. For me, it's otherwise." He plunged his hand in his pocket and pulled out the dice that were his inseparable companions. He grinned across at Abiathar. "I'll throw you for it! Three throws to gain, and if I win, I go to Omo."

"I'll not be party to it."

"Then I go to Omo."

"You'll do so such thing."

"Who'll stop me?" haughtily inquired his owner.

"The jungle," said Abiathar calmly. "The first zetabonga that pumps its yellow poison into the calf of your leg; the first time the branch of a tree turns to a snake in your hand and shoots its venom into your veins; the first dose

of fever that lays you prostrate beside the stagnant pool that's swarming with the microbes that gnaws yer intestines to ribbons if you're mad enough to drink——"

"To hell with you! Am I the first white man to go into the jungle?"

"No; nor the first white fool," was the dispassionate rejoinder. "The whites that go up-country get acclimatized before going, and the experience of a score of others to draw on. By Christmas!—will you risk your life to pander to the vanity of a nigger?"

"And what makes you think I value life so highly?"

"Don't talk foolish, cock; you've got the world at your feet."

"Then I can tread on it. It's my fancy to go to Omo. I've had my fill of the ship, and I'll be glad to spend some weeks ashore."

"If that's all, you'll find no one more pleased than Pleydell to offer you hospitality. Stop behind, by all means, while we do the other forts; but keep out o' nigger politics." He laid a friendly hand on Matthew's shoulder as he continued: "Come, cock, be sensible; think of all the future has in store for you. There's not a wish in the world you can't gratify; not a creature on this god-damned Coast but would sell his immortal soul to stand in your shoes. The game ain't worth the candle. All the wealth of the Indias won't compensate you for the loss of health, that's mankind's most precious possession, and the start and finish of his self-respect."

Matthew preserved a stubborn silence. The coast of Africa was before him, cut in black-paper silhouette between the star-strewn sky and the midnight blue of the water; only the white fringe of the surf, faintly audible along an invisible beach, cut into the darkness. Beyond that narrow belt of civilization which, with British arrogance, held the forces of Africa at bay, was the trumpeting of the elephant, the striped menace of the tiger; were the camp-fires and the unimaginable ritual of native cults; were the heads of enemies drying on stakes round the chiefs' huts and the painted wizards making magic under the light of the moon. . .

"At all events," Abiathar was saying, "it'll be three or four days before we hear our terms; and if they follow Montcalm's accounts, they'll be rascally, preposterous terms to which no self-respectin' trader 'ull lend himself. We'll have a look at the barracoons to-morrow and make up our minds whether it's worth while hanging around. Being short for space, I ain't minded to ship trash, and, as we're coming back later on, it ain't worth while loading ourselves up with teeth and so forth, till we've got space to stow 'em——" He broke off, glanced at Matthew, and seeing that it was useless for the present to argue, wished him an abrupt good-night and went below.

Matthew lifted his slack wrist to wipe away the sweat that was running into his eyes. Although they had been for days in the hot latitudes, he had not yet experienced the difference between a ship moving and a ship at anchor, or the smothering horror of a night off the Coast.

On Brandon Hill the cool night airs were moving. The roses of St. Michael's were being blown against Pallas's casement. . . .

III

"Anything in the sick bay?" snapped Abiathar. He had singled out one of the men with a nod, and the ship's surgeon, Monroe, stepped forward and performed an examination as perfunctory as it was indifferent to the feelings of its object.

"Two fellows being treated for the yaws and a pregnancy that'll be over in an hour or two," yawned Montcalm. He was in bad condition; the butt of his cigar was chewed to pulp and the black overseers walking at his heels looked scared for their lives. "Anything here you fancy, Mr. Flood? That one will build up into a useful specimen."

The youth indicated by the plaited ox-hide whip stood as though transfixed, his torso twisted, his black eyes of a fawn riveted on the speaker. He was about sixteen, he had been one of the best spearsmen of his tribe; here he was nothing—seventy inches of bone and muscle shallowly bedded in black flesh for his captors to evaluate according to their own tariff; perhaps to rot with two hundred others in a sixty by twenty-five-foot space, or, surviving this, to be broken on a plantation.

"I'm not interested," muttered Matthew—hating Montcalm, whom he suspected of sneering at his ignorance. He looked quickly away from the boy, who had an uncomfortable beauty. The factor chuckled.

"You're right, sir. It's not often we get visitors with so fine a feeling for the quality. Mind you, they can't all afford to indulge it. . . . But wait a bit, till the new batch comes down-river, and we'll show you the meaning of prime nigger. This lot's from Kola, but the ones that are coming in are Fantees, and I'll guarantee you thirty pound a head on them."

"I'm hungry, ain't you?" whispered Abiathar, as Montcalm turned aside. "A lot that means to Jimmy! He'd see a man die on his doorstep before offering him a drink."

"Mean, is he? In that case I'll see he carries out his promise of asking us to dine!"

"Leave Jimmy to go his own way. There's some queer tales going round about Jimmy; I hear 'em from Raikes at the fort. He's got a nigger woman."

"Hasn't every one?"

Under the palm-leaf hat that oddly replaced his official insignia, Abiathar's eyes, narrowed against the sun, followed Montcalm across the glaring enclosure.

"If Jimmy's keepin' a woman, I'll lay it's for no nateral purpose. Jimmy ain't one for women; the bottle's his interest—and he's got an old nigger, related to the black bitch that keeps the whoreshop over by the fort, that's kept house for him eight or nine years. She's always done for Jimmy."

"What's his age?" asked Matthew curiously.

Abiathar shook his head.

"Like the Wandering Jew, he ain't got any. Nobody knows how long ago Jimmy parted with all his human qualities—to the devil. He's Satan's breed all right, is Jimmy. You only got to see him with a gun in each hand, hitting the bull with both shots at the same time, to know who's guiding the lead. Don't have an argyment with Jimmy on a moonlight night—or, if you do,

shoot first. I seen him shakin' like an aspen, pumpin' lead into a runnin' nigger at twenty yards—you seen 'em dodge? They're like rabbits on the run. And when they picked the fella up, three shots out of five was in his heart."

The young man to whom they had been introduced as Mr. Pilgrim of Endor, and who had strolled down to the barracoons, now approached and invited them very civilly to eat at his house. He was agent for Christie Doran, and had a little factory some two or three miles farther along the coast.

"I've been speaking to the Governor, and he's glad to put horses at your disposal. If we leave now, sir," he said to Matthew, "we shall avoid the worst of the heat."

Accordingly, Matthew, Abiathar and Monroe, after taking leave of Montcalm, accepted their host's escort to the house at Endor, where they ate well, waited on by a good-humoured mulatress who bore the title of Mrs. Pilgrim and seemed to merit it; for Endor was by far the cleanest and most comfortable house that Matthew had seen since his arrival. Pilgrim's little establishment stood cheek by jowl with, but separate from, the much larger and more imposing residence of his employer, which had so much the character of a South Carolina gentleman's residence, with its pillared porch, its attempt at a formal garden and its double row of shuttered windows, that Matthew's attention was captivated. He remarked, somewhat naïvely, that it was surprising to come on such evidence of civilization in those parts.

"The climate doesn't lend itself to civilization, sir," was Pilgrim's rejoinder; he was a pleasant young man, who admitted frankly that his two years' experience of the Gold Coast had been enough for him, and that he only waited to save enough money to pay for his return passage. "Few people care to build, knowing that their chances of survival to enjoy the results of their pains are limited! Mr. Doran spends very little time here; he has a place in Barbados from which he conducts his business, and only comes on short visits to the factory."

"Is it unknown for a European to adapt himself to the climate?"

Pilgrim and the surgeon exchanged glances; Monroe mumbled that he would give the average four years: that there were freaks like Jimmy Montcalm who lasted twenty, but that twelve months proved sufficient in many cases he had known.

"But it's healthier up-country?" persisted Matthew.

"I don't know much about the inland," admitted Pilgrim. "My job holds me here, and apart from a trip or two up the creek, I've seen nothing of the interior."

"You've not been to Omo?"

"You mean the King's village? No"

Aware of Abiathar's lowering looks, Matthew said no more for the moment. It might not be a bad idea to have the companionship of a man like Pilgrim, who, however short his experience might be, knew much more than himself of the native customs and conditions. He waited until both of the elder men, overcome with heat and wine, were nodding, before returning to the subject with his host.

"I have the idea of going up to Omo."

Pilgrim blinked his light eyes with their sand-coloured lashes. He was young enough to be much impressed by the distinction of Matthew's manner,

and he was the type that devotes itself instinctively to that which it finds admirable.

Matthew, who had his grandfather's gift for detecting good servants, and, by reason of his personal attributes, more than Hercules' power of exploiting it, knew by instinct that he had gained an adherent.

"Would you like to go with me?"

"There's—there's nothing I should like better," stammered the young man. "But as I'm on duty here, it's hard to see how such a matter could be arranged——"

"Leave that to me. If the trip comes off, I promise you shall be of the company."

"When do you start?" asked Pilgrim eagerly; but Matthew laughed and brushed the subject aside, warning Pilgrim, with a finger laid to the lips, that it was a matter for discretion.

IV

They were back at the fort before sundown, where a messenger from Montcalm brought news that the canoes had arrived and were debarking for the barracoons. Still on their horses, Matthew and his companions rode over to the landing-place, passing on their way a chained and stumbling procession. Wretched as the condition of the slaves appeared, they had time to remark that they were, for the most part, much finer and stronger types than the Kola negroes they had already seen in the barracoons.

The fleet of canoes was pushed into the bank, and the rowers, assisted by twenty or thirty of the factory hands, were dragging out the piled cargo. The slaves who, bound with grass ropes, had been flung into the bottom of the canoes, were half suffocated or half drowned, according to their positions in the heap of helpless bodies; several were unconscious, the remainder stupefied, or rendered crazy with terror, were rapidly handcuffed to the travelling chain, the whips cracked, another sorry cavalcade started up the river bank. The blood ran from places cut by the ropes, there were raw patches on hips and elbows; a young woman, with her breasts cut by the sharp wooden edge of the gunwale, was howling in agony.

Matthew copied the impassivity of his companions, but he was startled. There seemed to him a wholly unnecessary brutality in the handling of the slaves, who were so reduced by pain and terror that they were incapable of causing trouble.

"If that's the Omo lot," muttered Abiathar at his elbow, "it 'ud be a rare pity to lose 'em."

Matthew set his jaw. They should not lose them.

He wheeled his horse and rode back to the barracoons, where for an hour he watched the slaves being cleaned, rubbed down with palm oil, and fed. Some were too terrified to eat; at the separation of the sexes, which was conducted roughly, with whips to drive the distressed creatures into their separate enclosures, there were some heart-rending scenes, the women clinging in anguish to their mates.

There were not only Matthew, Abiathar and Monroe, but Captain Bentley

of the *Flagstaff*, with his chief officer and surgeon, two other newly arrived captains and the master of a coast trader, with the Sherborough agent, Meiklejohn; these eyed the enclosures cursorily and muttered among themselves about Omo and his unheard-of demands. Reservations were taken on certain lots, the traders coming to agreement among themselves on the apportioning of the goods—provided Omo came to heel.

The excitement of commerce tingled in Matthew's blood. The more he saw of this game, the more he wanted to handle it himself, not by deputy; yet native shrewdness bade him hang back, until his experience justified him in backing his own judgments. They were saying, were they, that the best days of slaving were over? Then it only remained for him to snatch from its sunset a richer harvest than others had gleaned from its zenith.

A confused vision sprayed his brain with drops of fire. He saw himself richer than any man on earth, richer than maharajahs, than sultans, than all the fabled grandees of the East: wielding the power that only riches can give, holding the fate of men, cities, even of countries in the hollow of his hand. He turned suddenly dizzy with ambition, as he saw himself capturing the monopoly of that rich trade which, more than the sober respectability of timber dealing, had brought wealth to his grandfather. What fools were they, who professed to despise money.

The twilight had fallen, and he was being devoured by mosquitoes. The sky was a blazing chrome yellow and the sea like dark sapphire when they got back to the ship.

CHAPTER III

I

"WELL," thought Matthew, shrugging and straightening his shoulders, which ached with the nervous tension of an unpleasant experience, "this is the slave trade." He had been watching, much against his taste, the virginity tests, and his stomach turned, but it was fatal to surrender to squeamishness in the early stages. As an important and remunerative branch of commerce, slaving had to continue; there were, without doubt, abominable aspects, but these must be overlooked for the sake of results—although there might be some means of ameliorating them. A thought so spontaneous, so outside the control of his conscious mind, flashed through his brain: that Pallas might never come to know of such scenes as these. Then pride and wrath rose, to turn the gracious thought aside; he summoned deliberately all the hatred that had driven out his love. Let no sentimentalities of that sort turn him from the path he was resolved to follow. Yet, to his horror, his eyes were filled with stinging tears.

It was several days—during which Abiathar fretted and fumed, for with trading held up and not enough legitimate occupation for the crew it was not easy to keep the ship's company in hand—before word came from Omo. To proscribe shore leave was the sure way to start disaffection: any of the ships lying off the coast would gladly have received deserters, for the majority of slavers sailed short-handed, and this state of affairs was, as we have seen, much aggravated by the wars. In despair, Abiathar ordered an overhaul, though caulking, whether with tar or tallow, was out of the question under that hot sun, which kept the oil sizzling and bubbling in the seams until a man could have thrust his fists between them. He had the shrouds and stays reset and the running tackle re-tarred. Meanwhile, no manner of threats, with dysentery, with the blacks' disease of ophthalmia or of yellow fever, could stop the men on leave from rioting at Black Jack-anna's; from whose far from salubrious establishment they were nightly flogged down to the canoes, and, if they showed resistance, clapped in irons on board the *Cassiopæia*. The atmosphere was very tindery and unpleasant; Matthew and the officers were instructed to carry firearms at all hours of the day.

But on the fifth day, five thin blasts on a horn sent every one rushing to the port side, in time to see a canoe, larger and more important than those used for common transport, break from the surf and shoot towards the ship, manned by forty rowers whose arms and shoulders gleamed like black-leaded cuirasses in the yellow glare that danced upon the waves. Half-way between ship and shore, a figure rose amidships, and, poised like a sable Mercury, his reflection zigzagging down into the clear waters, repeated the salute on a horn made of elephant's tusk. The *Cassiopæia* responded with a fanfare from the ship's trumpeter, and a few seconds later the canoe slid under her bows, the dripping paddles raised perpendicularly, like spears in the hands of triumphant warriors.

Upon a raised seat in the stern sat a magnificent personage, at sight of whom Matthew with difficulty repressed a shout of laughter; for, mother-naked from the waist down, this representative of all the might, majesty and power of Omo had thought fit to enhance his splendour with a scarlet mess jacket, while from his head sprang the immense, multi-coloured plumage of a woman's bonnet. Yet as he rose to his full six feet of manhood, Matthew, in common with his companions, was obliged to concede that even these exotic decorations did not detract from the essential dignity of the full-blooded negro.

The mouthpiece of Omo bent upon him the unfathomable topaz regard of forest regions, as he topped the ladder where Abiathar, having assumed for the occasion the full regalia of his rank, received him. Two grinning interpreters and a native guard of seven warriors accompanied this imposing figure, that dwarfed the crew who, drawn up by Abiathar's orders, stood wooden-faced, in support of their captain.

Introductions passed, with solemnity. Omo's spokesman was profoundly imbued with a sense of his own importance. He proceeded, with childlike simplicity, to demand "dashes"—presents—far in advance of his dues, before stating his master's terms. From a chair placed on the deck, he made condescending selection from the goods offered him, and when Abiathar "closed down," brusquely signifying it was all he would get, had the loot rapidly conveyed to the canoes—a hint he was taking no chances. Then, and only then, he condescended to discuss matters of business.

Matthew and Abiathar exchanged glances; the latter made an almost imperceptible movement of the head.

"No coomey, no trade," was the bland rejoinder, translated with equal brevity—while Omo's minister of export pointed the refusal with a copious ejection of saliva upon the deck. Abiathar's hackles rose; for a slave-trader, he was touchy about his deck.

"Tell him we're prepared to pay the usual coomey, an' duty in proportion, but damme if I'll be fooled by His Majesty or any of his representatives.

A chatter of coast lingo now informed them that Omo no longer considered the old rates adequate payment for the increasingly arduous task of collecting slaves and forwarding them to the coast; that the "pawn" system—that of exchanging men, often of the trader's own family, against the value of goods not yet received: such pawns, in case of non-redemption, being taken and sold by the ships holding them—had proved highly unsatisfactory to Omo, who by this means, and through nothing but a trifling miscalculation of dates, had been deprived of several of his most promising young kinsmen; and that unless these matters were rectified, there would be no more trade between Omo and Fort Charles.

The palaver continued throughout the afternoon, during which was consumed, with admirable equanimity, the better part of the cask of brandy prepared in advance for the delectation of the visitors. Matthew had watched them preparing it: pumping out a quarter of the cask and filling it up with a solution of red pepper and water—the raw liquor being almost tasteless to the negro palate.

A lot of small sediment boiled up in the course of the palaver: Omo's annoyance that he was not accorded the royal salute given to Dahomey; an indistinct and quite unsubstantial history of a party of English sailors who,

penetrating by some means as far as Omo's village—Matthew pricked up his ears—had pelted the inhabitants inconsiderately with banana skins; in short, as Abiathar said later, as much twaddle as you might hear at an old maids' tea party in Bristol. But sufficient to show that Omo was in a bad humour, and intended sticking to his bargain.

The following day a conference was called; the other captains, the trading personnel and Matthew sat round the saloon, which was like a furnace, despite the open ports on either side.

After an hour of discussion, Abiathar banged his fist on the table.

"At all events, we're in accord that the new demands is outside o' reason, and that no one's willin' to trade on them terms?"

A doubtful mutter answered the question; it was young Pilgrim of Endor who put into words the misgiving at the back of every one's mind.

"At the same time, it's no good blinking the fact that the supply's not what it was. Christiansburg's plaguy close, and so is Fort James. If Omo chooses to send his stock down to the bigger forts, where the turnover's quicker, we'll be driven to depend on the smaller sources of supply, that's barely enough to keep the factories alive."

Bentley growled something about a punitive expedition; several agreed with him; Montcalm regarded the lot of them as though they were fools.

"I make the suggestion, gentlemen," persisted Abiathar, "that we enter into agreement not to trade on them terms. So long as Omo knows there's hopes of one of us secedin', he'll keep up his demands; but if we stand together he'll find he ain't got no choice but to alter his tune. If he sees this roadstead empty, he'll think better of his ways, and, with your agreement and co-operation, I'm ready at an hour's notice to weigh anchor and make farther up the coast."

A glum silence followed this plain speaking. Someone asked what sort of stuff was to be had from Goree, and the answer was a grimace from those who knew. It was mumbled the forts were not minding their business; what was the point of maintaining them if they did not foment the internal wars upon which the slave trade mainly depended? The Sherborough captain muttered something about the mouth of the Volta, and raiding expeditions up-river; but all knew the poor profits to be had of such methods, and all recognized the seriousness of the Omo position, since Omo and Dahomey were the two countries which, since the beginning of the shortage, had kept up their usual traffic with the coast.

"I want them Fantees," growled Captain Bentley. "And to get 'em I'll burn up the country and Omo with it. I've got a full crew and I can send an armed force up-river to-morrow that'll soon bring that bloody nigger to his senses."

"If you do," put in Montcalm quietly, "you'll finish the trade for everybody. I know Omo. He's not a bad fellow, but he's got a mind as rangey as a cat's—and, for the moment, a cat that's been rubbed up the wrong way. He's got the Fantees by the short hairs; he's the strongest ruler in Ashantee, and your expedition—if you send it—will stand as much chance as hens in a thunderstorm. You haven't seen Omo on the war path, eh? My advice, for what it's worth, is *stand off*; he's just seeing how far he can go—and it won't be guns that'll make him change his opinion."

"Then why don't you try changing it for him?" sneered Bentley. "It 'ud be to your advantage—wouldn't it?—to do so!"

Montcalm ignored the jibe. It struck Matthew, not for the first time, that there was something that went beyond humanity in this narrow, shaky creature: something that had passed for all time beyond the jeers of ignorant or foolish interlocutors like Bentley. One could see him, from the depths of his knowledge, despising their folly.

Matthew was making up his mind: or, rather, Montcalm was making it up for him. That he felt, in the depths of his consciousness, and tried not to let it affect his judgment. Evidently Montcalm felt the thing could be done; but how?

Though none would have guessed it from the assurance of his bearing, Matthew was acutely conscious of his own lack of experience, as he leaned forward, and, by doing so, found himself in command of the assembly. The other faces—hard-bitten, sly, or merely disillusioned faces—turned instinctively towards him: towards the handsome, tough fellow with Hercules Flood's blood in him, who had inherited a fortune for which one or two would have been prepared to commit murder. In his place—one could read it in their eyes—they would not be frittering time in a climate like this, on an old stinking hulk that was more than likely to founder before she reached home waters. Through each man's mind went racing a picture of what he would do were he in Matthew's position. . . . In the opinion of the majority he was a fool; but a fool who might serve them, if properly handled.

Reading their thoughts, as though they were crystal, Matthew allowed his quick smile to light his countenance; but the white flash was gone in an instant, and the mask that faced them was hard as stone, hard as Hercules', when he was on the track of a profitable deal. He was no fool, and he was not there to serve anybody but himself.

"Gentlemen, this isn't the first time I've discussed this topic with Mr. Montcalm, and I am persuaded his opinion is worth more than our own. I gather from him, as well as from the person who visited us yesterday, that our treatment of Omo has been—well, shall we call it negligent? At any rate, in His Majesty's opinion, we haven't paid enough respect to his royal state. Over a simple matter of diplomacy, you'll agree with me it's folly to be defeated." He avoided Abiathar's eye, which he knew, without looking, was reddening with choler.

"What's Omo?" blurted out one of the other captains. "What's Omo, will anybody tell me, that he thinks he can sit up in his town like the Grand Cham of Tartary, and have us grovelling to his representatives?"—a growl of agreement followed this piece of rhetoric. "Dahomey, Calabar, all the rest of 'em come down and see to their own affairs, while that blasted Jack-in-office sticks his nose in the air and thinks he's at liberty to insult the British flag!"

One of the captains, overcome by heat and refreshment, here hiccupped something about God Save the King, and Matthew, biting his lip, wondered how he was to bring them to his way of thinking. He caught the cold, ophidian gleam of Montcalm's eye, and leaned forward again.

"Gentlemen, you have all experience that makes my own a mere matter of pretension; but I'm going to ask your patience for a moment or two before we dismiss our subject. It is not to be supposed that you, or any one else

with demands on his time, should put yourselves out over a matter of native bumptiousness. But as I am here, and time is likely to hang heavy on my hands, I propose, with your agreement, to see what I can do in the way of putting His Majesty in a better temper and bringing him to his senses."

The astonished silence was broken by Abiathar's snort of indignation. Glances were exchanged; someone made the uneasy observation that it might be better to leave it to the Company, a suggestion scorned by most of those present.

"We all know what leaving it to the Company means: half of us lose our jobs and the rest can twirl their thumbs while Omo's being bombarded. I'm with Jimmy—for leaving it alone. And if anybody cares to pay the new charges—well, it's up to them to square the owners."

"Speaking as an owner, I'm not inclined to be squared. If we give in once, we give in for all time; ain't that so, Montcalm?" The other nodded indifferently. "I'm willing to go up to Omo and treat with the King; but on certain terms which, as the palaver's worth as much to you as it is to me, I hope you'll all accept."

Montcalm's eyes were fixed on him now, and some separate lobe of Matthew's brain registered the thought, "Lord, how I loathe that man!" Yet, knowing it was to Montcalm he must look for the furtherance of his scheme, he forced himself to smile: remembering there is no more disarming weapon, whether it be to critic or enemy, than a smile. Yet why should Montcalm be either his enemy or his critic? There was no reason for any sort of sentiment between them. The sense of loathing, which he knew was reciprocated, was no more than one of those reasonless antipathies that set men at odds more effectually than any material cause for enmity.

"If I can persuade the King to accept the former duties, and to abate the head tax, I want the pick of the first fifty slaves at present in the barracoons, and hereafter, for any of my ships trading in these waters, the first call, to the number of thirty, on all future consignments," said Matthew smoothly.

They looked at each other; it was a tall order, for the demand was great and the supply, at least latterly, not nearly equal to it. It was common for a ship to visit a dozen ports before she picked up her full cargo; and if Floods were to take them, thirty at a time, as they came down, it would formidably expedite their trading, to the prejudice of skippers who had to hang about, waiting for a dozen here, half a dozen there; and, at Fort Charles—which, although not one of the bigger stations, shared with Cape Coast, Anamaboe, Accra and Whidah the reputation of producing the best stock on the coast—taking Flood leavings! It was not an attractive proposition; in fact, it came preciously close to creating a monopoly, which, by Company law, was forbidden. Knowing this as well as anybody, Matthew waited, drumming his fingers on the table.

"I also," he added, as though by an afterthought, "require free accommodation for my stock, pending the Omo negotiations."

Abiathar's hand went up to his mouth; one or two sniggered openly. It did every one good, to think of Jimmy Montcalm giving something for nothing. Still, it would not be nothing; if the deal came off. Montcalm lit a cigar as though he had not heard.

"It depends, o' course, on what we think Omo's worth," grumbled the

captain of the *Bengal*, a Liverpool trader which had only got in that morning. The smiles broadened. Every one knew what Omo was worth: it had taken more prisoners in a decade than any other fighting tribe within practical distance of the coast, and its hunters were the jackals of the rivers.

Matthew sat silent and let them wrangle; he had learned long ago that it is better to say nothing when one has nothing to say. Abiathar also withdrew into sullen silence. It was not for him to attack his owner's decisions in public, but he had plenty in reserve.

The heat simmered, all had thrown off their coats and sat stripped to their slacks, the hair on their chests flattened like seaweed by the sweat that poured off them. The conversation grew more and more drowsy; once, twice, Matthew's head dropped forward and he jerked it upright: but there was no struggling against that overwhelming desire for sleep that came with the heat and the drone of men's voices. There were peacocks on Lydia's lawns, and from the heart of the rose garden the graceful heads of Pallas and Orabella tilted themselves backwards, to scan the sky anxiously for rain. *That* was reality, and all the rest a dream, he was thinking, as he crossed the sward to be greeted by his unexpectant lady. . . .

II

"Ef you don' do not'ing wid dat nigguh," Lubina was saying, "I's not be ans-able. I cain' do not'ing wid huh no mo'. She ain' no good fo' house-work, I cain' teach huh not'ing; she jes a big, fat, lazy nigguh eatun her haid off! An' ef yo' do' wan' huh, you bettuh sen' huh down to ma sistuh-in-law Black Jack-anna!"

Out in the little high-walled yard sat Sheba, in the blaze of the sun; her naked knees drawn tenderly sideways, to the curve of her young breasts, playing with a chameleon, which she was amusing herself by putting on and off a piece of red stuff stolen from Lubina. It was a fountain-figure, of utter innocence and grace. Her teeth glittered with amusement at the colour-changes of the chameleon, which, striving to emulate the background on which it found itself, succeeded only in turning a rich orange.

Tiring, with the inconsequence of a kitten, of this oft-repeated trick, she sprang to her feet, and, with a movement as hard and swift as a catapult, dashed her plaything against the wall. She had, after a single glance, no further interest in the lifeless body. She would find the palm-oil. She would oil herself again.

Old Lubina moved the fan backwards and forwards over her master's head, too old to be tired, to be malicious, to feel any of the sensations that had troubled her youth. She had recited Sheba's shortcomings dispassionately. Sheba, her presence in the house, made no difference to her; but she had wit enough to see that they made a considerable difference to her master.

Jimmy lay groaning, in another fit of fever. Twelve hours of delirium were succeeded by prostration, by shivering fits that chased themselves like mice down the cords of his body. Why not death? The fever devil must have had enough fun out of him by now. But not death—just yet! The solitary thread—and it was as strong as steel—that bound him to life was out in

the yard, playing with a chameleon. One more woman, O Lord! Just one; and then—cards down.

But by now she had got him in such a state that he could not bear to have her in his sight: though always, in the dark, tormented cells of his brain, moved her midnight form, both more and less seductive than reality; for reality was her blank, negroid reservation, her indifference that was the more provoking because it was unfeigned—the indifference that had stung him, once or twice, to attack it with the lash. By God, she should give him something! She should surrender some of that mystery to her master—if mystery flowed from her in blood. Sheba's yells, those nights, rang from the barracoons to the fort; yells more of anger and fright than of pain, for Jimmy was too weak to thrash her as he would have liked.

They grinned, at the fort and Black Jack-anna's, and said Jimmy was getting his money's worth; but they knew better than grin when Jimmy appeared among them, a risen corpse, a skeleton jangling about his barracoons, getting on with his business.

"Ef dat gel don' hab a husband soon," observed Lubina laconically, "dey'll be trubble; an', 'member, I'se not ans-able."

Montcalm cursed her by all he knew—for he knew she was right.

"She mischeevous like a monkey, an' dey ain' not'ing she wou't do, jes to 'scape ef any one takes deir eyes off huh. She jes a big, fat, no-good nigguh, dat don' care for not'ing but huh 'pearance. What she done but steal ma best basin, to look at huhself in; an' dere she is, from mawning to night, holdin' de basin dis way an' dat, 's'if she nebber seen huhself befo'!"

"Get her a gown," muttered Montcalm.

It took much to disturb Lubina, but this suggestion evidently fanned some moribund spark of pride. In their reddened and sunken sockets her eyes became lively with indignation.

"A gown? For dat Sheba? Who-ebber done hear of sech a t'ing? Gowns is fo' spectubble ma'ied ladies, not fuh no-good nigguh gels dat nebber done a stroke of work in deir libes!" Her gnarled fingers smoothed with resentful pride the cotton folds that covered the sunken mountain of her body.

"Damn you, get her a gown!" whispered Montcalm.

III

Abiathar had washed his hands of the matter, declaring his intention of taking the ship on to Whidah, where his old friend, "Grandy King George," would certainly receive and treat him with all the consideration in his power. British traders were popular at Bonny, and he was anxious to get in ahead of the *Bengal* and the *Unicorn*, both of which, partly slaved, were profiting by the hold-up to refit for the Middle Passage. As a matter of formality, and with a stiff economy of expression that marked his disapproval of his owner's intentions, he had discussed with Matthew his plan to cut the crossing short at Barbados, where there was an almost certain market for the slaves, or, failing this, to go no farther than Grenade; being determined on no account to risk encounter with French vessels out of Martinique.

Matthew agreed to this, while stating his own intention of going on to Cuba,

where the ship was due to call on her return voyage. This would give him, between the second crossing and the return, something like eight months—perhaps more—with the option of returning to England by another vessel, if he wished to do so. Barbados, he opined, was hardly large enough to harbour himself and his Uncle Jonathan for more than a week or two; he would therefore debark there, visit his uncle's plantation—since the latter was bound to offer him hospitality—and take the first ship that offered for Cuba, where he would find plenty to amuse and occupy him until the *Cassiopæia's* return.

"You're still set on this mad-cat scheme?"

Matthew laughed. They were in his cabin, whose decorations, on which he had insisted in some fit of arrogance, of ostentation, of God knows what unholy sentiment among those which possessed him at the time, now seemed incredibly childish, ill-chosen and tasteless in relation to their surroundings. Turkey carpets, woven curtains, silken bedspreads held no further satisfaction for his restless spirit, which knew not what it sought. Hides, leopard skins, trophies wrested from this jealous country—these were in tune with his present mood. The life he now wanted was a savage life; there was no savagery in these silken surroundings with their subtly effeminate influence. Splendours he would have: but they should be savage splendours—gold and ivory in place of gilt and porcelain, the striped magnificence of the tiger, from which to inhale the tiger's ruthlessness.

"You can call it mad-cat, if you like; and whether it's worth it or not only time will show; but, by God, before I've finished, I'm going to be a king along this coast! I've tasted Africa . . ."

"Ay; I see you have. At Black Jack-anna's." But for all the bitterness of the retort there was more trouble than anger in Abiathar's eyes. He knew—none better—the inebriation of Africa, its subtle yet violent appeal to the stranger, and he could gauge to a nicety how these effects were enhanced by the raw and excitable condition of the young man who sat opposite, his fists clenched, his face flushed with the wine of which, even according to Abiathar's easy notions, he had taken a considerable amount more than was good for him. "Swigging with Jimmy Montcalm in a nigger pot-house! So that's what you call Africa."

"To hell with you. You know as well as I that it pays me at present to stand in well with Montcalm. You don't think I enjoy the fellow's company?" muttered Matthew sullenly.

"Nobody yet put his trust in Jimmy without regretting it. Jimmy's faithful to one thing only: to the accounts he turns in to the Company at the end of the year."

"Who's trusting him?" sneered Matthew. "I'm not an infant in commerce, Crown! If I can effect an amicable settlement with Omo, it'll profit Montcalm no less than the visiting traders. I wager he doesn't overlook that aspect of the situation!"

He poured out more wine, slopping it on the board as he did so; and lifted the glass in a far from steady hand, to look into the crimson depths like a visionary into the heart of a crystal.

"Africa . . . Africa's a woman. A dark, devastating witch of a woman: coiling herself round you like a snake, making you forget everything but her

burning breasts. Listen to the drums of Africa . . . I heard them to-day in the barracoons: reminding every man of things he forgot when—when he left his mother's womb. Africa's a woman, 'Biathar; don't you make any mistake about that. A woman with gold in her veins—can't you see 'em? Grains of gold, dancing like corn on the turbulent torrent of her blood."

"You're drunk," said Abiathar. Matthew roared with laughter.

"Whv not? It's drink ill-illuminates the brain—makes you see through the mists of reason to the visions that wait on the edge of that dull borderland they call sobriety. Sober, you're—you're penned within the narrow limits of th' actual"—he made a ludicrous gesture. "Drunk—drunk—why, man alive, you can pen-penetrates to the heart of all th' myshteries that—that ring our narrow hemishphere!" He levelled an unsteady finger at his companion; in that moment he was startlingly like Hercules. "I'm a wise man when I'm drunk, Abiathar."

"Ay," said Abiathar, after an ironical pause. "Jimmy Montcalm's found an apt pupil. Yer makin' grand preparation for an up-river trip."

With the change of mood of which only the drunkard is capable, Matthew swung from geniality to truculence.

"I'll be obliged if you'll mind your own business!"

"Have done with this blether! Answer me this—if yer not too drunk to think. What's takin' you up-river? T'aint't diplomacy and t'ain't tradin'—for ye know nought of either. It's yer own damned vanity, and the desire to advertise yer importance along these shores. And all the folk ye think yer impressing, a-laughin' behind yer back! Ay, Jimmy grinnin' in his yella teeth an' sayin' there's only one way to handle owners that thinks they know more than the chaps that works for 'em. He's set his trap, an' nicely ye fell into it—ye pig-headed gaby! Him an' Omo—chucklin' their heads off after ye've gone: 'tis enough to make a decent man vomit. How d'ye know this isn't a put-up job between the pair of 'em—a nice little arrangement for mutual benefit? Omo'll hold out till Jimmy tips him the wink; then there'll be a palaver, and it'll be Jimmy that settles the matter—with advantage to himself at both ends. 'James Montcalm, faithful servant of the Royal African Company for twenty years'—that's what they'll put on his tombstone when Jimmy's gone; and meanwhile, you—buttering Omo's black paws—*ach!*" Abiathar spat, unable, seemingly, longer to contain his disgust.

Matthew's face had gone white as marble and his jaw—the square jaw with the hard, round knob of chin—crawled slowly forward.

"Ay?" He came to his feet, straddling beneath the low ceiling that would barely allow him to lift his head. "Let me remind you, Captain Crown, that where my own interests are involved I'm less easily hoodwinked than you seem to think. It's also said that a fresh eye sees clearer than one that's blurred with gazing on its object."

Abiathar sat doggedly, staring across the table.

"I always heard tell," he muttered, "that 'twas useless to advise your grandfather."

"Whose example I am content to follow."

"It's apt to be dangerous—when fools follow the example of a wise man; since they can but copy the outside, without understanding of what lies beneath."

Matthew waited a moment and moistened his lips before replying. He was very drunk indeed.

"Since there seems small prospect of our seeing eye to eye, it would perhaps be better, captain, for you to seek other employment at the end of the voyage."

"That's for you to say."

Matthew was silent, unsteady, uncomfortable; then he lurched towards the door. Each felt the tugging of the cord of friendship that had woven itself ever more and more closely since the hour of their meeting; but neither would acknowledge it.

It was Abiathar who broke the wretched silence, while Matthew fumbled for the latch: Abiathar, also on his feet, his eyes flaming with hurt and resentment.

"In one respect at least it might profit ye to follow yer grandfather's example. Hercules Flood was never known to go back on a faithful servant."

"Perhaps his servants showed more discretion in their dealings with him than you, captain, have shown with me!" spluttered Matthew, taken aback, as much by his inability to get the door open, as by Abiathar's words.

"I ain't no lickspittle; nor, I'm persuaded, did Hercules seek his service among them as 'ud fawn on his opinions. If that's what ye want, there ain't no choice but for us to part company," was the stout rejoinder.

Matthew stood still, his head dropped on his bosom. He felt miserable, self-pitying and wretchedly lonely. Can a man live without friends? He knew his fortune would bring him friends a-plenty, and made no mistake about what such friends would be worth. His head ached and spun; he swayed where he stood, and there seemed to be an impossible distance from the ceiling, where his head was, to his two feet, planted upon the deck. He looked suddenly so young, so baffled and beaten, that the elder man took pity on him.

"Come now. Maybe we'd ha' done better to have saved this, till you was in a fitter state for argyment; but there ain't so much time left, and it goes sore against the grain to leave you here—not knowing what plaguey tricks you'll be up to, nor what Jimmy Montcalm 'ull let you in for."

He stopped. Was it not folly to talk in such a fashion to a headstrong man, spoiling for adventure? Yet it seemed to Abiathar, in his simplicity, that there must be many better adventures ahead of young Matthew Flood than that towards which he was headed.

"Ain't you got no ambitions for the future, cock? Slaving's a fine business, but it ain't a lifetime's occypation for a fella in your position. Let us others make the profits for you to spend, to yer own advantage, an' the advantage of others. Yer grand-dad was a noble spender!—as his city has cause to remember with gratitood. If Bristol ain't to yer liking, what's to stop you raisin' yer palace in whatever part o' the country promises better to your way o' thinkin'? God damme—yer free as air! Have ye no curiosity to taste yer freedom?"

"What else am I doing?" muttered Matthew. "And you girn at me for it."

"Hell fire! What's up with ye? Ye call it freedom—this patch o' devil's earth, that most of its inhabitants 'ud thankfully exchange for Newgate jail? I'm all for folk enjoying themselves in their own way. But the line yer takin' don't make for enjoyment; leastways, not for such as you, that knows the

difference between high livin', as Jimmy or I might regard it, an' the fine, proud way yer grand-dad brought up his sons."

"A way that wasn't extended to his grandson. I made my own life from the time I was fifteen, and, by God, I'll go on making it—to my own pattern, and not to other people's."

Matthew had at last succeeded in wrenching open the door, and, as he did so, one of the negroes who had come aboard with the fresh foodstuffs slouched past, flashing his teeth at Matthew with the witless insolence of his kind. With the unreasoning and bitter exasperation of a humiliated man, Matthew raised a shaking hand to point.

"You see that? D'you think I forget I was turned down by a woman for cattle like that? You talk of building palaces; does a man build himself a palace to sit in it alone, in contemplation of his own magnificence?"

"Not unless he's lost his wits," said Abiathar dryly. "He finds a wholesome woman—there's a-plenty—to carry on his race for him; and, with sons at his knee, he's got no need to look farther for a reason for existence. By Christmas, the times I've thought——!" He broke off; his jaw clamped itself on the unspoken desire.

Matthew broke in curtly.

"None of that for me. Raise sons, to be the sport of some bitch's fancy? 'I'll go no more a-maying.' When one woman washes her white hands of me, I ask no more of her kind. Don't trouble yourself, 'Biathar. I know what I'm doing—and it may be the black heart of Africa holds more for me than the land of my people; at any rate, I mean to find out."

If this was what love could do to a man, Abiathar thanked the God for whom he had a secret and prudent regard that he had been spared such experience. But the tough, unequal material of which his heart was made suffered an odd little contraction, at the thought of a tall girl with a russet feather round her hat, who had dared him to exercise ship's discipline upon her. . . .

CHAPTER IV

I

MATTHEW found living at the Governor's residence very comfortable, Pleydell having found a handsome young mulattress from Cape Coast to cook and keep house for him.

"She ain't calling herself Mrs. Pleydell, all the same!" he chuckled, over the cocadeco stew he and Matthew were enjoying—cocadeco being, as Matthew had discovered, small birds not unlike the partridge in the quality and dryness of the flesh, but delicious served with the *purée* of beans and slices of roast pork that formed the almost invariable accompaniment to the local repast. "One has to keep up appearances, even on the Coast. Authority, my boy—authority carries with it some grievous deprivations!" A friendly wink assured the guest that Pleydell did not allow these deprivations to weigh heavily on him. The more of his host he saw, the more Matthew liked him. Beneath an easy, almost negligent manner he glimpsed a shrewd capability in the handling of men that had no need to call on the tinsel trappings of so-called state to enforce its authority.

Pleydell was one of the few in his position who had chosen to maintain the standards of respectable living in an environment that absolved the majority—at least in their own opinions—of the least effort, moral or intellectual. With the exception of the priest, Father Cleery, he was the only one in possession of a library; around the walls of the living-room a number of rough shelves were stocked with shabby, old-fashioned volumes, much handled, and reduced in some cases to a mere sheaf of dog-eared pages, which had accompanied their owner on his many travels. Horace, Aristotle, Longinus stood—somewhat unexpectedly—cheek by jowl with Lebossu's *Traité du Poème épique*: which Pleydell candidly admitted he had never read, having picked it up "only to exercise his French," which proved unequal to the task. "Yet I wouldn't part with it; it ain't bad for a man to be reminded of his limitations." A treatise or two on philosophy, the plays of Dryden, a singularly comprehensive collection of Restoration literature and the complete works of Shakespeare formed, to use his own words, "the barricadoes of the mind," and held at bay the influences to which most of his colleagues had succumbed.

The native boys were standing behind their chairs to beat off the flies, and the fans swung overhead. Even the wine was tolerable, for it was brought up, a bottle at a time, from the cave the Governor had just finished excavating at the back of the house, and was consumed before it lost its subterranean freshness.

"So you're taking young Pilgrim up to Omo with you?"

"Does he say so? We've hardly discussed the matter."

The Governor smiled.

"He came over to ask me to use my influence with Doran. I don't fancy Christie'll be too pleased at the idea."

"It makes no difference." Matthew shrugged his shoulders. "If Doran objects, I can well take the trip alone."

"Can you?" Matthew remembered the original impression he had received of Pleydell's authority over his little colony. "Pilgrim's a newcomer, so to speak, and he ain't got more than a word or two of the lingo; but he's got a head on his shoulders, and—to put it plainly, Mr. Flood, he's learned not to laugh at Africa."

"You surely don't think——?"

"Don't mistake me. There's a lot of things about Africa that's uncommonly funny—when you've learned to see 'em that way. It's funny, when you come to think of it, to see a man walking about in full possession of his health and faculties one day, and the next stretched out under a sheet, till it's cool enough to shovel him out of reach of the jackals. It's funny what flies can do to one's brain, when you're too weak to shoo them away; and it's funny when an old nigger gives you a certain look, and you feel your blood turning to solid ice, and every vein in your body aching fit to burst——"

"Voodoo?" In deference to his companion, Matthew did his best to keep a note of incredulity out of his voice.

"Voodoo," said Pleydell simply. "Voodoo's damned funny—until you meet it. Ask Pilgrim; they had a queer set-out at Endor, a few months ago."

"Well, voodoo, flies or fever—they strike me as grim, rather than funny," Matthew interrupted him.

"It's all a point of view. You can learn to laugh at plenty of things, on the Gold Coast, that 'ud strike you quite another way, if you were at home. . . Has it ever struck you, Mr. Flood, that there are times when it's folly not to be afraid?"

"I should think that depends on how fear takes you. I've not had much experience."

"You mean you've never been afraid? Come, come; you can't ask me to take you for such a fool as that!"

The tone was so pleasantly rallying that Matthew laughed outright.

"Honestly, sir, I can't remember a time since I was a child, when I have had the evidently salutary experience of fear."

"You may increase the sum of your experience on your way to Omo," said Pleydell dryly. "They're great on voodoo, up there."

"You're not trying to scare me off?"

"If I imagined you were a person to be scared, I'd have done it before. So I wish you—and Pilgrim—a pleasant trip."

"And supposing Mr. Doran refuses to let him off?"

"In that case, I fear you'll have to resign yourself to staying at home. While you're here, you're my responsibility. I ain't got time to look after any trouble you may get yourself into, through ignorance or lack of acquaintance with our local prejudices."

"Then, sir," said Matthew, with his defiant yet charming smile, "I hope your persuasions will succeed; for I should dislike to add to the weight of your personal burdens."

"You'll not do that," said Pleydell easily. They looked at each other, with a clash of opposing wills

"Would it be indiscreet to ask how you would prevent me?"

It was Pleydell's turn to smile.

"Come now, we won't meet trouble half-way. Doran and I'll have our talk—he's expected at Endor to-day or to-morrow, and I've given our young friend my word to beard him as soon as he arrives." He drew heavily on his pipe. "He won't be pleased. Pilgrim's his right-hand man. For all his youth, he's got an enviable authority with the staff—and he's humane with the blacks."

"He seems a superior sort of fellow for the job he's doing."

"You'd be surprised," was the dry retort, "how many of us here are 'superior sort of fellows.' Chadwick of Accra is a Master of Arts of the University of Cambridge; that down-at-heels rapsallion you saw talking to the girl outside Black Jack-anna's graduated here by way of the English bar. We don't ask questions, but now and again something leaks out. There ain't any shady gossip, however, about Pilgrim, and being somewhat out of the way, at Endor, he's had a chance to stay decent. I've even heard talk of a wife in England."

"In blissful ignorance, naturally, of Mrs. Pilgrim of Endor! Trustful lady; lending her husband for two years—and more, I suppose, to come—to the slave trade."

"From what I hear, there ain't much trust about it. She played him false, and he came out here to get over it. At least, that's how the tale goes. Folks have to invent reasons, you know, in a community like ours—and Pilgrim's always kept his affairs to himself. He hates the place, and he's going home as soon as opportunity offers."

"One can hardly wonder at the vanity of women, when they are able so markedly to prove their influence over our so-called stronger sex!"

Pleydell shot a shrewd glance through the tobacco smoke.

"Civilization. It's civilization ruins 'em," he said simply. "Woman in her natural state is the abode of all the virtues. That's my opinion, founded on forty years' experience, on and off, among the savage tribes. Speaking as man to man, I've come across more simple and wholesome qualities among savages than ever I've met in women of my own race. For chastity, cleanliness and fidelity—not only corporal, but spiritual (ay, it amuses you, don't it, to hear me talk of spirituality among negroes? But I've proved it, never mind when or how)—give me a young African negress, fresh from her forests. But at the first touch of civilization's dirty finger, they deteriorate—ay, it's tragic to see 'em; it's worse than the brown on the edge of a camellia in a young girl's bosom"—what perfume from the past was this, persisting through the heady scents of Africa? "It seems," resumed Pleydell, "as though the finer the flower, the quicker its decay. Too delicate to hold its own beauty . . ."

"Yet isn't it generally held that the black races—the females in particular—have an infinite capacity for vice?"

"Vice; what is vice?" asked Pleydell unexpectedly. "Ain't vice the indulgence to excess in habits that don't belong to humanity in its state of nature? The blacks ain't vicious among themselves. They catch vice—like you or I might catch the smallpox—from mixing with folk less particular than themselves. And, to my way of thinking, there's little if anything to choose between the debauching of a young negress and the carnal abuse of a child."

"You hold strong views, sir, for a man in your position. I hope there's no

offence in asking if you don't often find yourself at odds with public opinion in these parts?" Matthew was driven to ask.

"Views do no harm, so long as you don't air 'em untimely," grunted Pleydell. "Live and let live is my rule, so long as law-breaking don't enter into the question. It's no part of a Governor's job to exercise a moral censorship on the Gold Coast; most of our poor devils have enough to occupy 'em, without bickering over morals—which, anyhow, are Father Cleery's affair. You'll maybe understand why I prefer the company of my books to that of my fellow men. There's something uncommonly refreshing in the plays of William Shakespeare, after an evening up at the fort."

The clatter of horses' hooves under the windows checked the comment Matthew was about to make, and both rose to see who disturbed the residential calm at this hour of the afternoon.

It was a big mulatto from Endor, who scrambled from his horse and, seeing Pleydell, came to the edge of the veranda, plucking at the broad brim of his hat.

"Dah's trubble at Endo', suh—an' Mars' Pilgrim am down wid de shakes. One of de niguhs done kill a man, and dey ain' nobuddy but Mars' Stillman in charge—dat got his haid bruk in de melly."

"Damnation." Pleydell was leisurely putting on his coat, and, with a word to the mulatto, went off to see the captain of the fort. Matthew remarked that he went himself, instead of employing a messenger—which might have been measure of the situation's gravity, or the impatience of a wise man, who will not stand on ceremony when important matters are at stake. It was half an hour—and Matthew had fallen asleep in a hammock the house-boys had slung on the shady side of the house—before he came back.

"Trust those plaguey blacks for running amok at this hour of the day. There ain't one of 'em got consideration for a gentleman's after-dinner nap." Pleydell's eyes creased with his good-humoured smile. Matthew had never seen him ruffled, even by events that taxed to the utmost his patience and equanimity. "I'm going over to Endor. It's as likely as not no more than a panic, but Stillman's as nervous as an old donkey, and if Pilgrim's laid out he'll be the first to lose his head."

"If I can be of service——" Mathew sat up, rubbing his naked shoulder-blades, that were scored with the hammock netting.

"On the contrary. A bout o' the sun 'ull do nothing to advance your plans for going up-river—if those come off; I doubt it, if Pilgrim's got it badly. Fever You're luckier than you know, not yet to have made acquaintance with our local scourge." The Governor was swilling water over his head and neck. "As I'm likely to stop overnight, I'll leave you to make the best of your surroundings. Ask the woman for what you want—and, by the way, don't let on that I'm stopping at Endor. The folk here are funny; they hate it when I'm out of the way."

"I'd a deal sooner accompany you."

"There's no point in it. Hell fire, here's Montcalm—well, Jimmy, I hope you ain't got any business for me; because I've got Endor on my hands—a fuss in the factory and Pilgrim laid out for the time being——"

Montcalm grinned as he mounted the wooden steps.

"No business, sir; I only came to let Mr. Flood know they'll be ready to

start the day after to-morrow. I got Ongwe as linguist; he's not the best, but the rest are Omo fellows, which might lend itself to prejudice——"

Matthew saw the slow, considering gaze Pleydell fixed on the factor, before nodding his head.

"You know your own business, Jimmy. But there's no hurry. If Doran ain't back, Pilgrim won't be able to leave—fever or no."

"Pilgrim's going?"

"That's the conditions," said Pleydell easily. He was forcing his feet into the riding boots one of his Eboe boys had brought him; the effort empurpled his head and chest to the point of apoplexy.

"Mr. Pleydell does not trust my ability to make my way up-river without company!" A wry smile covered Matthew's fury; he felt he was being made to look a fool before Montcalm.

The latter looked wall-eyed.

"So Doran's back?"

"Expected to-night or to-morrow; by the way, Jimmy, you might do me a favour. I'm dining at Endor, and Mr. Flood will have no company save his own—unless he asks in Raikes who, for all I know, may be on duty. Why not invite him to share your meal? It'll surely be more agreeable for both than sitting solitary over your wine."

Whatever were Montcalm's views on this proposition, he did not bat an eyelash. He bowed stiffly, said he would be glad to entertain Mr. Flood at nine or thereabouts, and took his departure. When he was gone, the Governor chuckled.

"It wasn't all on your behalf!" he admitted. "For my books and my boys' service are superior to anything you'll find at Jimmy's. But it was a chance of getting back on him for his confounded meanness, and I ask your pardon for sacrificing you to it." He threw a quick look at Matthew. "And, by the way, you may find it less dull than you fancy. He's got a nigger girl that's set all the teeth watering from here to Accra. But I doubt if you'll see her; he's said to keep her staked up like one of the stock, and never to let her loose unless he or the old woman's on guard. An unconscionable fellow, Jimmy. There's no one less predictable, in words or actions—and, for the sake of his vanity, he's just as likely to put her on show for your benefit!"

"It's not so agreeable, all the same, to be forced as a guest where one isn't wanted!"

"Make no mistake; Jimmy'll be gratified—after he's got over the anguish of sharing his liquor and his larder. And you may fare well; his old woman, when she kept house for Brickdell, at 'Mina, was the best cook this side o' Benin. The nigger loves to show off, and she's had precious little chance, since Jimmy took her over."

"Mr. Pleydell." Matthew followed the Governor as he descended into the sun. "I want to say—it's only right I should warn you—that I'm determined *in no circumstances* to put off my trip to Omo. I tell you this now, not because it is my desire in any way to seem to flout your authority, but so that the foreknowledge of my intentions may perhaps lend persuasion to your arguments with Doran, if you find him at home."

The Governor's face darkened; he had slipped his thumbs into the leather belt that held the slacks up round his heavy abdomen; he lowered his head,

and it was as though his features thickened with resentment of this challenge to his authority.

"My answer to that, Mr. Flood, is that while you're here, you'll take your orders from me—whatever means I may choose to enforce them."

"Orders!"

"Make no mistake, Mr. Flood; I think well of your trip to Omo. The mistake made by most of the trading folk who come out here is that they overlook the necessity for friendly co-operation between ourselves and the native chiefs. To them nigger's nigger, and they forget—or ignore—the fact that some of the rulers on whom we're most dependent for our trade have traditions that 'ud make their own pretty poor reading. In my estimation we owe this visit to Omo, who's not had the treatment due to him from the British along this coast. Does this sound as though I were trying to impede your progress? If you see Omo, you can give him my personal assurance that if he chooses to pay us a visit he shall have all the considerations due to his dignity. But you see him on my terms, Mr. Flood: not on yours. Don't forget that, or the consequences may be unpleasant—for both of us."

He turned brusquely to the groom who held his horse in readiness. While he mounted—with a curious nimbleness for so heavy a man—a detachment of military, in charge of one of the officers, clattered down from the fort, on the miserable nags that were kept for the inland expeditions. Matthew, somberly watching, noticed how the slatternly and indifferent bearing of the men stiffened into something more nearly martial at the sight of the Governor, who covered them with a glance like the sweep of a sabre from the shadow of his palm-leaf hat; and having called the officer's attention to the fact that one man's girths were not properly tightened, and that the cap of another's powder flask was missing—having seen that these inexcusable evidences of slipshod supervision were set right—placed himself at the head of the cavalcade which set off in a cloud of dust along the track to Endor.

It would have been foolish to blink the fact that Pleydell had the whip hand of the situation. It is one thing to act on one's own authority in a country one knows, whose language one can speak—or can at least supplement with gestures that mean something to the inhabitants. It now all hung upon how—however far Montcalm was prepared to go in defiance of the Governor's orders, or whether the blacks themselves would be too much in awe of the Governor to accept a lesser man's commands. This at least must be settled—and it must be settled to-night. The uncertainty of Doran's return, the possibility of his refusal and, above all, the likelihood of Pilgrim's still being too sick with fever to make use of the permission if it were gained might otherwise cause serious delay—if they did not scotch the scheme completely.

He swung in the hammock, his hands clasped in the nape of his neck, his mind stubbornly on the future. By treaty with Omo, not only the pick of the slave supply, but all its rich resources of gold, wax and ivory might be at his disposal, and, as slaving declined, the value of these other commodities would certainly remain stable. Yes, the horizon was expanding! Half-way between dreams and waking, he saw himself as the man of destiny. Later on, he might go in for banking: the scheme of a vast, international system had sketched itself once or twice vaguely in his mind. To hold a country's monies was to control its wars; one could alter the map of Europe—of the world!

Strange that Hercules had never wished to extend the scope of his influence; he could surely have done so, had he chosen. There was no doubt the old man had been too closely wedded to Bristol, to the interests of his birthplace, to the memories clinging round the home of his ancestors. . . . Triton Lodge.

What went on there now? Was the dust creeping over the furniture, the spider's web thickening in the cornices? Did the drift of a dry leaf send echoes of solitude all through the deserted walls? Chests of treasure, bolted and locked: shutters barred—by Pallas's hand, as surely as though she herself had thrust each bolt into place. Barred against him: did her cold heart ever take that into account?

II

Having cursed at his household, execrated Lubina for her slipshod house-keeping, sworn at dirt and disorder to which he had never paid previous attention, and lapsed briefly into snivelling self-pity at being the victim of a gang of black thieves—Montcalm ordered a complete turn-out of the place.

"Den dat Sheba can help as well!" indignantly asserted Lubina. "'Caise ma ole bones won' do de work dey useta, an' ef I got a meal to get ready——"

"Sheba'll do nothing; you understand? It's no business of hers, she's not here to do housework."

"Lawdy me! Seems like dat no-good nigguh's gwine to be queen ober us all!" whined Lubina; but she knew better than disobey a direct order of Montcalm's.

One does not admit a haughty young owner to squint down his nose at one's private squalor! Damnation on Pleydell for his interference with the current of one's life. And damnation on Matthew Flood, whose patronizing manners should earn him a lesson, be he owner or not, if Montcalm could devise it. To be an owner at that age! A bitter pang of envy wrung Montcalm's withers, at the thought of that insolent, triumphant youth, in full enjoyment of benefits it had never earned. He promised himself the satisfaction of thrusting his hand deep into those sumptuous pockets, making free of accounts me lord was too grand to scan. Or was he? It was not wise to take Flood negligence for granted, and the young 'un had a rich plenty of the old 'un's blood in his veins. Montcalm made a mental note to go cautiously; he could at least make sure of a handsome profit on the Omo trip.

To add to his discomforts, he had started a touch of cra-cra—the unpleasant native eruption that spreads a crust all over the infected parts and nearly drives one mad with irritation. The pot of ointment, made from a native prescription of powdered ebony and emulsion, was empty; he dragged himself into the out-house to see if there was another, and, while there, received those preliminary warnings that told him he was in for another bout of dysentery. Oh, well, with luck the plague might hold off overnight; at all events, he'd got to get the expedition started. Groaning, on a barrel, with his head in his hands, Montcalm swore slowly, comprehensively, with senseless repetitions, at the Gold Coast, at his life, at owners in general, at Omo and at Sheba.

As Matthew came from the fort, the scene, under the light of the moon, was almost as pastoral as that of an English farmstead. The entrance to the

factory was a large, square yard with a duck-pond in the middle, at whose edges slumbered the dark copper and peacock-coloured birds, their heads tucked under their wings. The factor's house, with the shack that harboured his two white assistants, formed one boundary of the yard, while the other sides were closed in by the store sheds, the cook-houses and the huts of the black overseers; all coated with whitewash, shining like silver in the moonlight. His host met him on the threshold, with an ironical and—such was the impression his words made on Matthew—hypocritical apology for the roughness of his surroundings.

"Not what you're used to, Mr. Flood! But you'll maybe fare worse before you get back from Omo. If this helps to effect the transition between luxury and the hardships of travel, the resources of my primitive household are at your disposal."

It was the speech of one bitterly conscious of inferiority.

Damn the fellow, thought Matthew; why should he think I want to patronize him? Aloud, he said good-humouredly:

"What makes you think I'm accustomed only to luxury? I don't need to tell you there's not much luxury in a slave-ship." He stopped, biting his lip; it was a pity Montcalm had seen that preposterous cabin. "And before that, I can assure you I had little time to acquire a taste for the comforts which, I suppose you're thinking, it is now my privilege to enjoy. By God, I worked for 'em! and it's a matter of opinion whether my efforts would be more distasteful to you than your present occupation would be to me."

Resenting this comparison—as fantastic as it was impudent—between Matthew's lot and his own, Montcalm growled an invitation to his guest to fill his glass. Matthew resigned himself; it was going to take a lot of liquor to get through this evening's *rête-à-rête* with Jimmy.

It was not until the meal was over, that the food he had not consumed and the liquor he had, restored to Montcalm some sense of his obligations as host, and even then, although his tongue was loosened, it was to boastful recitals of his past exploits, that Matthew would have found exceedingly tedious, had they not furnished him with some useful sidelights on his companion's character.

"Mr. Montcalm"—he broke impatiently into a long-winded account of a mutiny in the factory—"I mean—in any circumstances—to go up to Omo." Montcalm's mouth hung open at the abrupt change of subject.

"I've no desire to embroil you with the Governor; but if, by carrying out my wishes, you should find yourself placed awkwardly, I should be glad to know what—what compensation——" he stopped; it was hard to know how to approach these matters with a man like Jimmy.

Montcalm laughed quietly.

"I ain't got so long to worry about Pleydell; I guess he knows the same about me. I don't draw my pay from him, and we don't fret about personal relationships in these parts. To put it more plainly—he can't do anything to me and I can't do anything to him. Is that clear enough?"

"And the convoy—how do we stand there? The men are chosen by you but approved by Pleydell; isn't that so?"

"As a matter of law and order—so far as we trouble about 'em here—the

blacks are under his control (except the canoe boys, who work for the factory); but most of 'em would risk it—if you made it worth their while."

There was a short silence, before Matthew asked:

"What do you think Doran will say?"

Montcalm shrugged his shoulders.

"Speaking frankly, Montcalm: is there any reason at all why I should not go by myself?"

"It's your risk," mumbled the other, "and if you choose to take it, it's no one's business that I can see."

"Good." Matthew rose and held out his hand. "Good-night to you, and thanks for your hospitality. I'll surely tell the Governor how admirably you have executed his commission!"

"Nay, nay"—Montcalm fumbled the hand aside. "What's the hurry? The night's young, and—Mr. Flood! Maybe my company manners leave something to be desired; it's twenty years or more since they were exercised, so it's not surprising if I've fallen something behind, as regards social observances."

"I assure you," interrupted Matthew, speaking more stiffly than he intended, because he found this cringing address even more distasteful than the speaker's former truculence, "I have no fault to find with my reception here. Allow me, therefore, sir, to seek my couch—for which your good dinner has made me devilish eager!"

A preposterously knowing glint narrowed Montcalm's eyelids.

"Ay, no doubt you're snug at Pleydell's—wait, all the same: I've got something to show you." He shouted for Lubina, who, long since asleep in a corner of the porch, uncurled herself and crawled into the candlelight to receive her master's orders, which he gave her in the native dialect. While the old woman shuffled away, Montcalm refilled the glasses. "Sit down; you've not dined well, so there's no point in denying it. My woman's past her work and I'll have to replace her one of these days. But what you lacked in repast you may, for once, make up in entertainment. These Fantees dance like devils; I've ordered a conjo for you, and if you see better up at Omo, I'll be surprised. We'll sit on the porch; you don't mind the mosquitoes?"

"I'm used to 'em by now." It was, after all, no worse to sit on Montcalm's porch than to lie in a pool of sweat, counting the hours, or to dream . . .

The moon had slipped down the arch of the sky and the yard was in shadow, but a host of indistinguishable forms began to take shape, and fires were built and quickly lighted in each corner; the flames ran down red into the duck-pond, disturbing its sleepy occupants, and illuminating a broad patch of clear earth on the opposite side, in front of the sheds. Presently, through the darkness of beyond the walls, came a clanking of chains.

At the sight of the flames several of the slaves made a great outcry, thinking they were to be sacrificed, or at least to be branded again; this, however, was soon quelled by the whips of the overseers, and when the gates were closed, the guards mounted and the negroes freed from their fetters, there was a moment of incredulous apprehension, while Montcalm's assistants made the unfortunate creatures understand that they were not to be punished, but to dance.

A few seconds later, pandemonium broke out. Banjos—produced from

nowhere—struck up their plangent rhythms, and the throbbing of drums evoked primitive emotions that found their ultimate expression in the leaping and yelling of a primitive people. The stars were as low and calm as lamps in the sky; the smoke of the fires streamed up and veiled them, while the white buildings, reddened by the flames, peopled themselves with shadows no less living, no less dynamic than the forms which caused them.

It was a strange, double dance, each man partnered by his shadow, who repeated faithfully, without humour, without exaggeration, the angular movements, the obscure gestures that had descended through a race no less conscious of its genealogy than British kings. An uninhibited people flung into the dance the most primitive desires of their souls and bodies; there was nothing too simple, too secret to be expressed by those bending knees, those feet that flattened themselves on the earth, as though to draw from it its utmost stimulus, those crooked elbows, vibrating breasts and bellies that drew their inspiration from the savage rhythm.

Matthew, a great connoisseur of the ballet, found himself renouncing his allegiance; what was there among those studied postures, those ultra-formalized movements, that could compare with this raw essence of life, that emanated from a people whose dance was as the dance of the ancient Greeks, *dromenon*, a doing: not a spectacle devised for the entertainment of a jaded and decadent audience?

Into this dance they put their hunger, their thirst, their desire, their conception—all the simplest things of which the human soul is capable; they destroyed with a trampling heel, with an obstreperous elbow, the whole structure of civilization and laid bare the core of humanity, its most primitive needs—before these were dishonoured by the unwholesome cravings of society.

Old Lubina, squatted in her corner, grinned and mumbled and nodded her grizzled head, at these noises which echoed back, far back, to the most distant reaches of her memory: to the days when she was a famous conjo dancer in her almost forgotten tribe. She no longer had nostalgia for the forest, but something reminded her that she was far on the way to what Father Cleery declared was the Greatest Conjo of all: where weary and aching limbs would leap and shake with the best, and a hundred drums and a thousand banjos reward the patient for their waiting. Lawdy, what a day it had been: 'most a week's work packed into two or three hours; and fish and meat and chickens to prepare as well—all, by one poor old nigger woman that wasn't used to hustling, and whose poor old head was like a buzz-fly by the time she was through.

. . . The drumming of bare feet through the inner room barely drew Matthew's attention from the spectacle; his chair was close to Montcalm's, and, before he had time to look round, his hand, which hung over the arm of the chair, was swiftly brushed by glowing flesh, a naked form flung itself over the edge of the porch and made towards the dancers with a cry, a brandishing of triumphant arms.

A yell came from Montcalm, and, following his gesture, two figures started in pursuit. The quarry hesitated, darted sidelong, and, with a movement of desperation, flung itself into the duck-pond, from which, with shrill protestant cackle and whirring of wings, rose the disturbed inhabitants, through a fire-

red fountain of scattered drops. Neither drums nor banjos, nor the dancers themselves faltered: it might have been part of a prearranged effect, for all its influence on the performance.

But as she escaped on the farther side—a moment later to have been swallowed in the dance—her foot slid in the slime that edged the pond; she fell headlong, to be dragged upright and forced back, her arms twisted behind her, towards the house.

It was thus, for the first time, that Matthew saw Montcalm's black orchid—yelling between her captors, her limbs of an ebony naiad streaming water, every perfection of her naked form presented and exaggerated by her struggles to get free. It was thus he received his initiation into the possibilities of beauty in her antique race—seeing her as Montcalm had never previously seen her: for rage and bitter disappointment had driven the habitual immobility from her features, that glared with meaning like a tiger's mask when it finds itself trapped. It was a whole history of outrage, the rape of an entire nation—rather than the simple capture of one truant girl. Her lips slit back, her teeth made a white square through which came the desolate, animal noise of her howling—that reminded Matthew of the cries of the slaves only by its long-drawn-out power of continuance: for while theirs was keyed to despair, hers held the note of vengeance, of revolt rather than terror. Nor was there fear in the eyes which, wildly rolling, revealed the whole of the silver circle round their unfathomable darkness.

As the group arrived at the foot of the porch, the men who held her jerked her backwards, as though to display the full worth of their capture to the watching company: and Matthew felt his mouth go dry and the blood beat in his throat, at the sight of that magic arc of ebony, bent like a bow: of the lifted breasts and satin flesh drawn tight across the arches of the ribs: of the soft belly and navel enclosed within the mystic semi-lune of the pelvis. No woman he had ever seen evoked in him so powerful or spontaneous response to her fleshly beauty: beyond and behind which moved an allure that was partly the music, to which her body gave physical and tangible expression: partly the inevitable attraction of the utterly unknown—the dangerous dark wildness of her savage state. He could feel in his own flesh the modulations of sensation that crept under hers; his pulses picked up the rhythm of hers as accurately as though their limbs were touching. In a flash he saw her as regnant queen over that background he had planned to create. Here was the supreme reason for the tiger skins, the gold and the ivory—all materials originated for the better display of the beauty that was hers. An orgy of luxury with her as its apex swept through him, possessed him. He was lost to all present, he did not even see Montcalm bending to pick up the implement which had fallen beside his chair, for he only thought: "This shall be mine!" while the girl, suddenly fallen silent, was driven past them into the house.

All reality dissolving in mist black like the drums, gold like the banjos: through which the crack of the whip and high-pitched screams came with an effect of exhilaration, of purely impersonal excitement unlike anything he had ever experienced, an exultation that swept one beyond the boundaries of human sensation, into some limbo where the disequilibrated spirit spun in ecstasies of sensibility. This phase of excessive cerebrality was followed by a burning in which perished the calcined remains of all former passions.

"Had enough of it?" Montcalm's claw was digging into his shoulder, the screams had died down—and no one remarked old Lubina, scuttering with the speed of a guilty conscience away to her hut. That Sheba! How could a poor old nigger woman, pestered with a hundred things, remember a no-'count girl like that? "These animals would keep it up for a week, if we let 'em; but I don't hold with too much conjo—works 'em up—makes 'em difficult to handle." His eyes were fixed on Matthew, as though to drag out by the roots the thoughts behind that set, black gaze. He gave a laugh, that might equally have been a snarl, as he flung an order to the nearest overseer, who ran round to pass the word to the others.

Slowly the night emptied itself of sound; the self-hypnotized dancers, roused from their trance by blows, ran first into little whimpering groups, where they trembled like half-wakened children, punished for some fault of yesterday that they cannot remember; then suffered themselves to be marshalled back on the chain. . . .

Matthew quickly refilled and emptied his glass. He needed to recapture something—some essential crust—that had been broken by his experience. The mosquitoes went zinging about his head, that spun with the overcharging of blood.

Montcalm stood by, still laughing quietly. The fires had sunk to small red craters, the reed mats were down, the bottles empty. He had paid a higher price than he had reckoned, for the breaking down of that cold superiority from which he had suffered for so many days. He had expected conjo to do it—not that conjo was unknown to fail, but Montcalm knew a conjo-subject when he saw one. But he had not counted on Sheba, as it were to overload the effect.

"One more bottle before you go?"

But Matthew had seen the look in his host's eye, and pulled himself together.

"I have taken enough for to-night . . . and, with thanks for your hospitality, will wish you a very good night—and sound repose!"

As he followed his unsteady shadow across the yard, it struck him that he had been a fool: that by making no comment on the incident with the girl he had stressed his own emotions no less distinctly than by some ill-judged enthusiasm. Some trivial compliment would have come cheap, and saved the situation. But it was of no avail, to indulge in such regrets; he knew he could not then—and doubted whether he could at any future time—speak trivially about Sheba.

CHAPTER V

I

"AND how did you find things at Endor?"

"And what, exactly, have you been up to in my absence?" The riposte, unspoken, was written clear as daylight in the glint of Pleydell's eye. Matthew chose to ignore it.

"Is Doran back?"

"Ay, he's back." Pleydell rested his arm in friendly fashion on the shoulder of the young man who, however much he found to deplore in him, he could not help liking. They strolled towards the house. "We had a talk over your plans. As I supposed, he ain't anxious to spare Pilgrim, but he thinks enough of your mission to stretch a point—as he's luckily brought a young nephew back with him who, working under Stillman, may manage to keep the pot a-boiling till you get back." Pleydell blinked gravely at his companion. "I needn't impress on you, Flood, the necessity of getting through with the business as quickly as possible. If the blockade continues, and the kaffles continue to come down, the barracoons 'ull soon be overflowing, and there'll be grave loss on both sides. Word's gone to Omo to hold whatever stock he's got on hand; but holding, as you know, means massacring, and trade's not good enough to stand for that."

"You needn't fear delay when once I've got this job afoot," muttered Matthew. He could hardly contain his eagerness to be gone.

"Pilgrim's sleeping here to-night, to be ready for an early start. His fever bout has shaken him up a bit, but he's as strong as a young ox; he'll be well by morning. He's all agog at the prospect of the trip. And now, before it gets too hot, we'll go round to Jimmy's, and look over the cattle he's picked for you."

Montcalm was not on view when they reached the factory, but his head man seemed fully advised of the arrangements for the next day's departure. The canoe-boys stood grinning for the Governor's inspection, the men who were to carry the baggage (which had been brought from the *Cassiopeia* and placed under lock and key in the stores) arrived at the trot: strapping Eboes, with their head man Iwolo and the interpreter Ongwe, who grinned acquiescence in the Governor's short, barked sentences in the local dialect.

"You'll be all right with that lot. Let Pilgrim do the arguing—if there's any to be done. And"—they were strolling back together and Pleydell turned to his companion—"if you want a little diversion before going up-country, I can put you in the way of a dozen personable wenches from whom you can take your pick and be none the worse for it. See? The first thing you've got to know about a woman in these parts is, if she's ever been at Black Jack-anna's; if she has, shun her like the plague. But there's one or two decent families, that's got religion, of a kind, from Father Cleery; and the girls are as wholesome as anything you'll find away from an English countryside."

Even with this straight lead to the subject which was seething in his mind,

Matthew could not immediately bring himself to mention Montcalm's woman. It was some hours later before he managed, with a clumsiness that astonished him, who had believed himself shameless, to broach the all-absorbing subject. Pleydell gave him a straight look.

"It's no use, Flood. You'll never get Montcalm's nigger; nobody'll get her, until Jimmy's bones—or hers: I'd not be surprised—are carried along that track that leads back to African dust." He settled deeper on the day-bed that he chose, in preference to a chair, for the repose of his ungainly figure. "There's been a lot of foolish talk—I don't doubt you've heard it—about Jimmy's spiting one of the Dutch traders, and so on and so forth; with their brains eaten away with heat, folk can't think straight—there's nothing in all that."

"Then what's it about?" scowled Matthew, wondering if Pleydell had noticed that his hand which held the cigar was shaking. He jammed it against the arm of the chair.

"Neither does Jimmy want her for—the usual thing a man wants with a woman," went on Pleydell, with maddening deliberation. "No, no; it ain't so simple as that.

"Jimmy wants, by owning a thing every man in the district covets, to persuade himself he's still the fine, powerful fellow he was when he came out here, twenty years ago. That black girl's the last spark of Jimmy's self-respect, and while he's got her he's still got the guts to run his factory and drive his overseers and treat us all like dirt: knowing there's a dozen fellows at least who'd murder him, if they got the chance, to get his girl. Ay, I've had Jimmy covered, for his own good, most of the last six months." Pleydell chuckled. "He'd spit in my face if he knew."

"Is it worth the trouble?" brutally inquired Matthew.

The Governor fumbled with his pipe.

"I've got a regard for Jimmy," he said at length. "Not personal; there's little enough to like about him as a human being. But for being the finest factor that's ever worked this district. I'd regard it as a reflection on my personal honour if I was to let Jimmy's bones—there ain't much left besides—be hustled on the last stage of their journey towards 'that bourn from which no traveller returns.'"

Matthew, who had paid but divided attention to the foregoing, abruptly put a question. Pleydell, spreading out the thick, hairy fingers of a mottled hand, shrugged his shoulders.

"Who's to say? There's only gossip to go by, and the old woman's declaration that the girl's still a virgin. You can't expect Jimmy to own to that! But it's as likely as not to be true. They say he gets his fun out of beating her. They've heard her caterwauling from the fort."

An oath burst from Matthew, at which Pleydell looked surprised.

"Pooh! Niggers yell for nothing, and Jimmy's arm's not what it was. He never gets over the fever, and he's had dysentery four times in the last twelve months. It would have killed any other man in his condition; but it seems as though there's nothing left in Jimmy to kill. Everything ground away but a bit of wire, so tangled in the web of life, there's no tearing it loose." He broke off, to cast a shrewd glance at the other. "I see I've bored you, Mr.

Flood. One's apt to forget, in the narrowness of a life like ours, the bigger interests of the outside world."

Ashamed, apologetic, Matthew held out his hand.

"Indeed, sir, I've got the most lively appreciation of your kindness—and more envy than I'd care to confess of your talents as administrator!" he said sincerely. "(But does he think I'm a sentimentalist, to be brought to pity by his recital?) I've had little experience of the handling of men, and I am not so pigheaded or so confident of my abilities as to disregard your examples. (But he doesn't mean to help me. I shall have to mind my own way. . . .)"

"As regards handling men—there's but one thing to be learned, and, simple as 'tis, you'd be surprised how many people in authority ignore it. To get the best out of your men you must know 'em, you must consider their whims and fancies, and you mustn't fall into the common error of believing that what does for one does for all. That's the only advice I'd give to any one that finds himself, unexpectedly, with power in his hands. If it's of any use to you, I'll make you a present of it, gladly."

It was impossible, thought Matthew, for all his impatience, not to be impressed by the man's simplicity.

"Mr. Flood," went on the Governor, after a pause, in which he studied the young, surly face before him, "you must come to know the people here, if you mean to go on dealing with them: which, indeed, I hope you may, for the best hope of encouraging morale in our unhappy community is to keep in touch with persons whose standards are those of a world we've, most of us, forgotten. I do what I can; but there's times I feel"—the big, coarse face took on a comically rueful expression—"that I don't cut a very impressive figure. I'm human, and I suppose I've fallen, like the rest, into Gold Coast habits of thought and action. Nay"—as Matthew seemed about to speak, he raised a fat hand of discouragement—"because one doesn't rot one's guts by drinking traders' rum at all hours of the day, and hasn't yet taken to whoring with the blacks, isn't to say one's immune from weaknesses that others have fallen to; it don't even say the time mayn't come. . . . Maybe it's not a bad idea; to get close to people you've got to a certain extent assimilate their habits of mind and action. That's what beats Father Cleery; he's tried for five years now to live the life of a presbyter in surroundings that—to put it mildly—don't lend themselves to that sort o' thing. And he's done for. We'll be shipping him home any day, if the climate don't get him first."

To whom was he talking? Not, assuredly, to the man who was eaten up with unholy desire for another man's woman: but to some half-forgotten stranger whom, once upon a time, Pallas Burmester had known.

II

It was round the fort in a flash, and reached the factory by way of some eavesdropper, that young Flood was after Montcalm's nigger. It was chewed over in Black Jack-anna's, and sniggered about in the officers' mess. Flood had offered this, had offered that; there was no limit to preposterous invention. If he wanted her, why didn't he take her? was the consensus of public opinion. He could pinch Jimmy's windpipe between his finger and thumb.

"Jimmy ain't got a windpipe," it was objected. "He's got a cast-iron tube laid on from gullet to guts, and there ain't no mortal fingers can cut Jimmy's wind."

By the afternoon it had got round to Jimmy, who, between attacks of the gripes, cursed the happenings of the previous night, and—for the benefit of his informers—grinned defiance of Matthew's pretensions. All the same, he was sick with fright. He had had Matthew's measure for long enough; here was the violent, arrogant, predatory blood that had enriched his ancestors—gathering impetus in its race from generation to generation. The thin fluid in his own veins turned acid at the thought. You may have ships, and you may have gold, and you may have your broad English demesnes and your persuasion that you're the salt of the earth; but for lack of one thing, Mr. Flood, you shall go through hell's fires of hunger and thirst; you shall come crawling, and I'll spit in your face. . . .

"Lawdy me!" Old Lubina, in her corner of the porch, listened to the rumbles within. "Mars' Mon'ca'm am po'ful sick to-day. Not h'ard him talk with debble like dat for weeks. All de better fo' you, yo' lazy, no-'count nigguh—an' all de better fo' me!" She shrugged her shoulders forward across her great, sunken chest. Montcalm had never beaten her much, but he would surely have done so last night, if he had had anything left over after beating Sheba.

As for the latter, she lolled in the solitary rocking-chair the place possessed as though it were her right, as though nothing had happened, a simper of self-satisfaction on her face—wearing the red cotton gown Montcalm had bought her, with its buffoonery of frills, which Sheba, with naïve lack of conventional modesty, had arranged like a horse-collar, to outline her uncovered breasts.

Before owning this precious garment, she had never sat in a chair: either squatting native fashion, or sprawling contentedly on the ground. But, with the dress, she had assumed airs of superiority. It was beneath the dignity of one owning a gown and calling herself Mrs. Montcalm to squat like a slave.

Not that Lubina allowed her the use of the title. The only time that, speaking of herself, she had made use of it—almost the first intelligible words she pronounced, nodding her head vigorously and pointing to herself, were "Mi' Mo'ca'm!" slurring it with glutinous, native disregard of consonants—the old woman flew at her, slapping and scratching her face until Sheba squealed with more genuine fright and pain than she ever evinced under Montcalm's thrashings.

"I'se teach yo' to call yo'seff Mis' Mon'ca'm, yo' low-down, trashy nigguh!"

She rocked in the sun, waving a palm-leaf fan, twitching the folds of red cotton, admiring the contrast between a wide gold bangle and the slim black wrist it adorned—Montcalm had not spoiled the ship for want of a ha'porth of tar—and occasionally jerking her head for the pleasure of feeling the hot golden circles in her ears tap a certain little ticklish spot on her neck. Occasionally she varied this performance by a stroll along the porch, with a conscious roll of the haunches that made the most of the cock's-comb red frill of the skimpy train. The one regrettable thing was that there was no one but old Lubina to see it; and she, instead of watching and envying, was dozing in her usual fashion—lids lowered over the faded pupils of her eyes, but not

quite covering the streaked carnelian balls. The mongrel dogs, twitching in their fly-haunted sleep, the indifferent ducks making an occasional mechanical stroke in their muddy water, the cookhouse boy fast asleep in the shadow of his hut were Sheba's only audience.

She had almost forgotten about the previous night. The world, for her, was a world of varied sensualities; few thoughts stirred beneath that close, black, woollen helmet. She had her shallow hatreds, her shallow likings, but she had yet to experience the storm of emotion that accompanies full recognition of the possibilities of the human body. The only feeling she recognized so far was a feeling of dissatisfaction and unrest that drove her to acts of impish mischief or rebellion. The noise of the conjo had stirred in her an emotion so profound, so primitive, as, paradoxically, to have left no subsequent trace; like a fire, it had consumed itself, and its very ashes were scattered in the dawn of a new day.

She took another turn along the porch—playing at being Mrs. Montcalm, waving her palm-leaf fan with the insolence of which only the negro is capable: with negroid inconsequence mingling the voluptuous with the grotesque—and it was so Matthew saw her for the second time, and the whole of his body went up in a flame.

There was something beyond all words exotic in that movement, in that form, that black-headed bird of scarlet plumage, that prinked itself in the blaze of a sun so violent as to drive to cover all save those with sun in their veins. The sun-begotten! The epithet chiselled itself into his brain, to be followed by another: the sable Venus!

He stood at the gate, gripping the hot wood that burnt the palms of his hands, using, as it were, the physical discomfort to recover his self-control, while his senses registered every detail that, the previous night, had been blurred in the shock of revelation. He saw the small head, with the arbitrarily backward-tilted profile—a profile, he now noticed, with a pang of added pleasure, less negroid than Egyptian in its silhouette; curiously delicate, for all the suppression of its salient features; the glistening black hair, the long, supple column of the neck. He stood as though graven, fighting the well-nigh irresistible impulse to snatch her there and then; while a cry which was at once an admission of weakness and a declaration of triumph went up from his soul: The sun—the sun is my undoing!

He knew, without looking, the moment at which she perceived him, and became still, alert, not knowing whether to fly at the approach of the stranger or to exert her privilege, as mistress of Montcalm's household, to welcome him. Old Lubina had risen, clucking, but he forestalled her entrance to the bedroom—almost to be beaten back by the stench of heat, of sickness, by the multitude of buzzing flies. It was the worst hour of the day for visiting; he granted reason to Montcalm's sour reception.

"You're inviting trouble, Flood. No one but a lunatic exerts himself while the heat's on."

"I heard you were sick," said Matthew shortly.

"And came to look up the invalid—was that it? Much obliged; such consideration ain't customary in these parts! There's the bottle—and, as I'm likely to be obliged to leave you pretty frequently, you'd better make your-

self free of your surroundings." He hobbled hurriedly towards the nearer of the out-houses.

Grimacing, Matthew found himself a chair. Here he was, and here he would sit—if he wasn't poisoned by the stench—until he got what he came for. The girl and the old woman had vanished; the disturbed ducks swam fussily about their pond.

Montcalm returned, seemingly thinner than ever, his face the colour of dirty parchment and still drawn from his agony. He lurched into a chair opposite Matthew's, and common humanity could not ignore the sweat that streamed in the channels of his face.

"Can I get anything for you?" Matthew stiffly inquired. Montcalm laughed.

"Dysentery and me's fought out our private disagreements too many years to drag in side arguments. It's nothing to take account of—all the same, it's as well as it's to-day, and not to-morrow, when I've got to be about to set you on your way. I had the head man and our own boys in this morning, and they're as clear as I can make 'em on what's got to be done——"

"I've not come here on Omo business. What will you take for your nigger, Montcalm?"

A look of unfathomable cunning came into Jimmy's eye; he sniggered a little, lit a cigar with shaking fingers, and cocked his head on one side, like a considering parrot.

"Well, now, I hadn't been thinking. She ain't worth much."

Matthew stiffened.

"The valuation's yours."

"Well—let's see. She was with Anstey at Cape Corse, before Brickdell took her over to 'Mina. And that was pretty near thirty years ago. Good character from both places——"

"Take care, Mr. Montcalm," said Matthew in a low voice. "I'm not in a mood for your pleasantries."

"Ain't you talking about old Lubina?"

"You know I'm not."

"Ah—the other. Well," said Montcalm, with an assumption of briskness, "you've seen the trollop. You said just now the valuation was mine; suppose you let me have yours, for a change? Since in my experience, Mr. Flood, value depends on the customer's interests in the goods."

"That does not happen to be my fashion of doing business. If you are prepared to sell, it is for you to name your price. If you're not, it will save time and breath to say so."

"I've had offers," admitted Montcalm, "but they weren't to be taken seriously. I've hardly considered the matter. The people round here ain't what you'd call connyasures, Mr. Flood!"—he leered at his companion—"and I've got a prejudice against castin' pearls before swine. To most of my neighbours, one nigger's the same as another; it's only a matter of importing new blood into the community. They see a well-built young female, and the whole lot are after her—as if there wasn't another from here to the Cameroons! Naturally, you have to keep freshening the stock; the sluts don't last long down here. Give 'em a twelvemonth and you'll find most of 'em on Black Jack-anna's doorstep——" Muttering, he made another precipitate exit; Matthew sat very still, waiting.

"Ay," Montcalm was saying as he returned, "that trollop's not the usual run o' the cattle we get down here. You've observed the ordinary nigger's mouth?—the lips like pads of rubber, filling up nearly all the space between nose and chin? She ain't got that common disfiguration of her race; though there's the big gap, and enough white teeth to make bracelets for both her wrists! But for a shapely pair o' lips—I reckon you might search many an English town without finding their equal."

Matthew sat, outwardly as impassive as stone, through this very evident parade of salesman's artifice; though he was hard put to it to keep his hands off Montcalm, whom he now suspected to be laughing up his sleeve.

"The nose ain't bad either," Montcalm was reflecting. "Flattened, o' course, from the root, and a bit spread at the base: but the tip's as neat as a little bird's bill. There's a few tribes like that, far in the interior—and they're mostly cannibal. But this girl got taken among a bunch o' Fantees, and she's more likely to be a sport of her tribe."

"Well, what's the general market value of a specimen like that?"

Montcalm wagged his head with well-assumed solemnity; he was ready to hug himself for the way this fish was coming into his net.

"There's no such thing as general market value for goods of that kind," he declared. "It depends on the agent; some of my colleagues would tumble her in among a job lot at four or five pounds a-head without noticing anything in particular; and it 'ud be a matter of chance whether they'd make their due profit at the other end. It's all a question of who turns up at the market; if it's a scramble"—Matthew had yet to learn the significance of this term—"it's fifty to one she might get carted off to the plantations with the rest. But it happens now and again that one of the fine me-lords of the plantations comes down to have a look for himself; in which case it 'ud be surprising if she changed hands under twenty—or even thirty, if there was enough competition. I heard of one female that fetched a hundred guineas in a Barbados sale: but there was a ring of 'em bidding against one another——"

"Then I take it you look upon thirty as an adequate price?" said Matthew, unable to believe it.

"Personally, I wouldn't sell at that," said Montcalm, speaking as though the matter hardly concerned him.

"Fifty, then?" In spite of the control he was exerting, a little of Matthew's caution slipped. Montcalm lowered his lids; now he had got his fish fighting!

"Nay, nay. You'll have to be a better judge o' values than that before you set up as a slave-dealer!" he mocked him.

"I have asked you to assist my judgment," said Matthew, between his set teeth.

"And I've told you the value depends on the buyer."

Matthew bit his lip until he felt the blood on his tongue. There was nothing for it now, he knew, but to come out into the open.

"Seventy-five pounds for your nigger."

The heart in Jimmy's breast ticked like a clock. Never, for many years, had he known such exquisite amusement as he was now enjoying. His lips stretched uncontrollably into a grin; he made the faintest possible sign of negation with his head.

"A hundred. And there, by God, I stand!" said Matthew, coming to his

feet. Straddling over Montcalm, he looked down with hatred upon the man who had him at disadvantage.

"A handsome offer!" sniggered Jimmy Montcalm. "It's a pleasure to meet someone who's in a position to make it. A worthy offer, Mr. Flood, well in tune with the munificence of your means!"

"Do you take it," whispered Matthew, "or do you not?"

"Do I take it?" Montcalm's hairless brows arched themselves in bewilderment. "I thought we was talking abstract. I've got no intention of selling; who's been telling you I would?"

At the thought of what a story he could make of it at the fort, Jimmy's lips again dragged themselves across the yellowing stumps of his jaws. Suddenly, before he could straighten them, the palm of Matthew's hand caught him flat across the chops.

"And, damn you, don't smile."

When his head ceased to swim, Montcalm stooped down and picked up the cigar that had been knocked out of his mouth. He also was on his feet, swaying like a reed, looking up at his assailant, when he said:

"No man, whether owner or not, slaps my face, Mr. Flood."

"And what do you do about it when they do?"

"You'll find out—if you're as much use with firearms as you are with your fists. Twenty years ago—ay, less—I'd have given you your lesson with these two hands; yes, for all your size, and your makings of a prize-ring bully! Ask 'em at the fort what Jimmy Montcalm was worth—six years ago—"

"To hell with your boasting," growled Matthew, already ashamed of venting his rage in such a fashion on so miserable an object.

"You'd sooner do the boasting yourself—is that it? We'll see how much braggart is left in you to-morrow morning, when, with your kind permission, we'll settle this in the fashion customary among 'gentlemen of honour'!—as no doubt you call yourself. I make no claims; it's easier. When you don't set up standards, you haven't the trouble of living up to 'em!"

"A duel?" Matthew could not quite keep the note of hesitation out of his voice. Like all young men of his class, he was snobbish about duelling. But he knew that to refuse to fight Montcalm, on the grounds that the latter was his inferior, would certainly lay him open to the charge of cowardice in a society that cared nothing for social distinctions. "I suppose with pistols?" He shrugged his shoulders. "As you please. I'll send my seconds to call on you."

He wondered who he would ask. Was Pilgrim to be trusted?—or would he blab to Pleydell and get the matter stopped? It would be wiser to ask Raikes of the fort; an affair like this was just his measure; he was always boasting about his duelling exploits at home. And Raikes could find the other man.

"We ain't in Covent Garden, Mr. Flood, and this ain't to be settled in Marybone Fields!" jeered Montcalm. "Keep your seconds; there's no need of outside interference in a business that concerns you and me only. I've no gentlemanly proficiency with the rapier, nor, if I had, would it serve me in my present state. I'll meet you with pistols, as soon as there's enough light to tell a man from a tree—and it will be a good send-off for your trip to Omo. Or farther."

Matthew remembered what Abiathar had said of Jimmy's prowess with the

pistol, and knew, from the look in his eye, that Montcalm would shoot to kill.

III

It was strange, he thought, as he lay wakeful in the night—Pilgrim had the doorless room adjoining, and Matthew could hear his breathing, even, peaceful as a child's—with the cloud shadows running across the moon, the dried umbrellas of the palm trees hissing in the night breeze and the long booming of the surf along the beach: it was strange to think that he might never hear these sounds again. A curious sense of balancing on the edge of eternity had driven from his mind even the thought of Sheba, who had been pepper in his blood for the last twenty-four hours.

It would have been vainglorious to ignore the fact that Montcalm was likely to come off the better in the encounter—and that coming off better meant the death of his opponent. Matthew was a better marksman with the gun than with the pistol, and better with the rapier than with either. He was out of practise, and he had no illusions about Jimmy's sticking to rules. If he knew his man, the factor was just as likely to drop him, without warning, before the signal was given. In a flash, the possibility of lying in ambush and ending the matter before it had begun crossed Matthew's mind: to be dismissed, because it was too easy.

Although to Abiathar he had disclaimed interest in life, he discovered in himself a savage anger at this attempt to dispossess him of that which all but the most wretched would fight to preserve. That which he had enjoyed, up to the time of his grandfather's death, was not "life," in Matthew's understanding of the word; and life, now that the means to live it had fallen into his hands, was a thing from which he had meant to extract its utmost juices, before the last, inevitable surrender.

Why should he be hustled into the void of eternity, before he was prepared—like a guest rudely expelled from a banquet? A guest who, moreover, had yet to taste the finest dish, the *pièce de résistance*, of the long-awaited feast? O tenderest morsel, O bird with the gilded feet, O peacock displayed in pride! Heaven could offer no compensation for this, nor the most exquisite torments of hell compare with the memory he would surely carry with him into the hereafter—of an ecstasy unproved. And neither heaven nor hell should prevent his return, to claim that which belonged to him surely, by the sovereignty of flesh over flesh.

Towards dawn he fell into a short, half-delirious sleep, in which he dreamed of a gulf, and Pallas on the other side of it, stretching out cold white arms: while in the gulf itself there was soft, dark, invisible movement and smothered laughter. He cried out, and was about to leap into the shadowed space—when he awoke. Dawn was just streaking the sky, and he rose, and quietly roused Pilgrim. It had had to be Pilgrim, because Raikes had failed to find another second. It seemed that none of the people he had approached were anxious to be mixed up in this affair of Jimmy and Owner Flood; and he had not prosecuted his inquiries too far, being of the same opinion as Matthew—that the fewer people privy to the business the better, or it might come to Pleydell's ears.

Pilgrim had accepted the position coolly, only demurring that, although

he knew the formalities of the rapier, he had never assisted at a duel with pistols. "Raikes will put you in the way of it," promised Matthew. He was pleased to have the support of this stocky, stolid young man, whose admiration for his patron was naively apparent.

At the gates of the fort they met Raikes and the army surgeon, who, with some uncouth jesting, accompanied them to the appointed spot—a little, tree-ambuscaded clearing where the slaves were examined, at the farther end of, and about half a mile beyond, the last houses of the settlement.

The sea had not yet picked up its day-time sapphire, and rolled from the horizon in parallel ridges of dove grey, faintly crested with gold; the lace of the surf lay almost imperceptible upon the pearl-white sand. Against a sky of daffodil the palm trees surrendered a little of their night blackness to the coming day, but were still dark, flat, unreal as aquarelle; and the mangrove swamp on the farther side of the clearing was a tangle of black, prehistoric shapes, petrified in copulation, from which, like the escaping soul, a solitary heron, its pale wings gilded by the dawn, took flight in horror towards the creek.

Montcalm was already there; seated upon an upturned barrel, he might have been there since the beginning of time—a dead log, warped and bleached by the sun. Across his knees lay two pistols. He was alone.

With a glance at Matthew, Pilgrim crossed the space.

"Do we wait for your seconds, Jimmy?"

The face that leered upwards was powder-grey, rimmed with red round the eyes.

"What the hell do I want with seconds?"

Taken aback, Pilgrim returned to the others. Matthew, stripping off his coat with Raikes's assistance, rolling up his thin, ruffled sleeves, scowled at the impudence.

"Tell him we fight under rules, or not at all. Raikes, you'd better go over and look after him, and the surgeon can give the signal. Confound the fellow. If we don't get on the sun'll be up and we'll have the whole town on us."

Raikes accordingly walked over to deliver the message, which met with no acknowledgment beyond a sardonic smile. Raikes shrugged; he and Pilgrim, having decided on the best spot for the encounter, paced out the distance, while Matthew opened the long shagreen case that contained the finest of Hercules Flood's collection of firing-pieces. The long, dark barrels, which Matthew had scrupulously oiled the previous night, and the butts elaborately chased with silver expressed the finest of Spanish workmanship; their perfect balance and smooth adaptation to the hand communicated confidence as he lifted them out of their beds of faded, moss-green velvet. He handed them silently to Raikes, as the latter returned to his side.

"I'll do the usual," muttered the gallant captain, with a glint of envy for their lethal beauty, "but I'll wager a pound to a penny Jimmy'll use his own shooting-irons."

The prediction was accurate; Montcalm sneered his refusal of the proffered weapons, at the same time contemptuously offering his own for Pilgrim's inspection.

"You'd better take care—as they're loaded."

The clear, sandy face of Pilgrim flushed with resentment.

"Yours aren't the first pistols I've handled!"

"You don't say!" was the satirical retort, as the barrels were emptied, recharged, on Montcalm's behalf, by Raikes, and by Pilgrim for Matthew.

Matthew walked rapidly to the place chosen by the seconds, as the sun's rim, breaking clear of the horizon, flung across the scene a shaft of pure gold. All that a moment ago had been spectral leapt into actuality. Here, then, was the moment of truth, the golden second, balanced on the edge of eternity! A bird, flirting its tail on a branch, seemed extraordinarily important; he wondered dispassionately if he was looking at his last sunrise. Montcalm had not moved.

"Montcalm. We are ready."

"Ay, so am I," said Jimmy, without rising. The four men stared; he stared back, with his twisted smile. "I've been ready the last half-hour, but I hadn't the heart to cheat you of your play-acting."

"I've had enough of your insolence, Montcalm." Matthew gritted his teeth. "Stand up, and let's settle this for once and all."

"Damn you," said Jimmy Montcalm, hardly above a whisper. "*I can't stand up.*"

Matthew caught his breath, suspecting a trick; the next moment he found himself whitening with rage. Smothering an exclamation, he uncocked the pistol, shook out the bullets and tossed it to Pilgrim, who, with a mutter of warning, thrust the other into his hand. "Look out! Don't trust him."

"I don't fight duels with sick men; but we'll finish this when I come back, Montcalm!"

"Sick?" said Jimmy. "Sit on that stump there, and I'll show you how sick I am. A man ain't got need of his legs to put a mark on a target."

"This is burlesque!" cried Matthew, almost too furious to know what he was saying.

"Burlesque?" repeated Montcalm, and there was a flash from his left hand. None of the spectators had seen him sight, but the surgeon's walking-stick—a thin malacca that he had thrust into one of the ash-heaps that remained from the brandings, and whose silver knob was tilted towards Jimmy, where he sat on the opposite side of the clearing—splintered suddenly, and the knob was a crumpled lump of silver, driven into the heart of the splinters. "Burlesque, do you call it?" Jimmy was saying softly, while the smoke cleared slowly away.

Matthew swore beneath his breath, and sprang to the stump Montcalm had indicated.

"Make yourself comfortable," came the ironic invitation. "There's nothing so bad for the aim as an uneasy posture!"

"Do you accept these conditions, sir?" Pilgrim's voice was crying, somewhere behind his back. Matthew nodded, because he could not trust himself to speak. Montcalm observed, while passing the used pistol to Raikes:

"The conditions ain't bad, as I took the trouble to find out before you arrived. The stump's a little lower than the barrel, which levels up our sizes. Owner Flood, I'm at your service."

"Are you ready, gentlemen?"

Both nodded. There fell a silence as deep and complete as though the little group were sealed within a vacuum. The surgeon stepped forward, and,

evidently enjoying his own importance, solemnly extended his right arm, a white handkerchief dangling from the fingers.

As it dropped, Matthew's trigger finger jerked—and it was as though a bar of iron fell across his wrist. Through the noise of the explosion and the clattering of the pistol on the hard earth he heard the scream of Montcalm, struggling in the grip of two militiamen, who had broken from the trees immediately behind him.

Matthew rose to confront Pleydell, who, red-eyed like a charging bull, purple under the stubble on his jowl, stood there, with his Eboe bodyguard impassive behind him. He leaned on the stick whose purple weal was already rising on Matthew's arm. His words were bitter in their brevity.

"Mr. Flood, I'm surprised at you. What's come over the pair of you—Englishmen, fighting over a nigger?"

"Is this minding your own business, sir?—a quality on which I thought you prided yourself?" was the furious retort.

The Governor's small eyes contracted.

"It is this much of my business; that if you weren't leaving in an hour's time for Omo, you'd spend the rest of your visit in jail."

"Let me remind you, I am not under your jurisdiction, sir!"

Ignoring the observation, Pleydell turned and spoke to his Eboes, who closed in on either side of Matthew. He found himself, to his furious astonishment, walking back towards the fort.

CHAPTER VI

I

"You've certainly made an enemy, sir, that few people in our part would envy you."

"You and they can save your commiserations. Jimmy Montcalm hasn't heard the last of me yet, by a long way."

Both spoke in low voices, to avoid the inquisitive ears of Ongwe, the interpreter, who squatted on his haunches between them and the paddle-boys. The long, narrow canoes, low in the water with their loads of baggage, provisions and carriers for the overland route, propelled themselves smoothly up the creek, each under the thrust of twenty pairs of arms, moving with the mechanical evenness of pistons; forty backs, shining with palm oil and the rivulets of sweat that rolled from the woolly bases of coal-black scalps, presented the incomparable play of trained muscles to Matthew and Pilgrim, seated in the stern of the second boat.

"Did it ever occur to you, sir"—Pilgrim spoke hesitantly, because there was nothing about Matthew, at that moment, to encourage intimacies—"that that might apply both ways? It's not my place to criticize the Governor; but it's my opinion—and Raikes's as well—that he might have been wiser to let the matter go through, then and there. It would at least have settled Jimmy's gall for the time being."

"And enriched the world to come—at his expense or mine." Matthew's laughter had an ugly sound. He was still raw from the cold leave-taking of the Governor, who had ridden down to see the expedition away, but made no secret of his desire to cut short the formalities of farewell. Matthew's pride was strong, he felt as ignominious as a small boy parting—on bad terms—with the headmaster.

"There was at least the chance of a miss on both sides. Jimmy's first shot was a marvel," declared Pilgrim, with irrepressible admiration, "but, by God, it was a fluke! A year ago we all reckoned him a dead shot, with either hand; but it ain't reasonable that a man who's had fever twelve months on end, and is too feeble to stand up on his two feet, should control a trigger the way he did when in full possession of his vigour. I'd got my eye on him; his right hand was shaking as with the palsy; that second shot might have gone anywhere within a yard."

"And mine? Supposing it had found its mark?"

"Were you shooting to kill?" asked Pilgrim simply.

Matthew paused. He knew the exact spot on which he had drawn his bead: the biceps muscle of Montcalm's right arm.

"If I was not," he said slowly, "it was because I find my enemies afford me more entertainment dead than alive." It was perhaps bravado, but it held more than an undercurrent of truth.

"Mr. Flood," said Pilgrim, the sandy lashes of his light eyes that seemed lighter in his sunburnt face blinking rapidly, "you'd have done better to have killed Montcalm."

"Maybe that pleasure is reserved for another day."

"If he don't get you first!" burst from Pilgrim's lips, before he was able to control them.

Matthew turned to look at his companion, with that intolerable arching of black brows that others found galling.

"Do you think I'm not a match for Jimmy Montcalm?"

"Certainly not," stammered the younger man, "in open encounter. But there are other ways—and life's not of so much value to Jimmy as it is to you. Mr. Flood, sir, I honestly believe he'd swing, to get you now. It's the wounded tiger, you know."

"I suppose a few months off a life like Jimmy's is neither here nor there." He forced himself to clap Pilgrim on the shoulder with a geniality he was far from feeling. "I'm obliged to you for your warnings, and I promise I'll remember them when we get back."

"I—I shouldn't wait until then."

"Meaning——?"

"Not to consider yourself safe till we're up at Omo. You're safe up there because, though Omo and Jimmy are reputed friendly, Omo's far too keen on consolidating himself with the British to lend himself to any rascally business—especially not," concluded Pilgrim, with his pleasant naïveté that made him appear a much younger man than he was, "in the case of a person of your importance. I can arrange for a special escort coming back: it's a compliment often paid by the native kings to visiting grandees, and if our business thrives, Omo'll likely offer it himself. Don't think I exaggerate, sir, or am over-persuaded of my own experience in affairs of this kind; but I give you my word, in dealing with a man like Jimmy, one can't be too much on the alert."

"Yes, yes, I know that," interrupted Matthew. "And I suppose we can congratulate ourselves that Jimmy's not in good enough fettle to do any travelling on his own account."

"It don't prevent others doing his travelling for him."

"I'd thought of that. Well, we must keep our eyes about us."

"And, above all, sir, be careful of what you eat and drink. I don't believe he's had a chance of tampering with the boys, but he's hand and glove with that old black witch that keeps the bawdy-house, and she's sufficiently obliged to him to execute his commissions, if he happens to call on her for help. There's a devilish potation called red water that the natives use quite a lot for settling their private arguments—that can be doctored to look very much like trader's rum; a bottle of that, supposing it found its way among our victuals, would cheat us of our trip, and King Omo of the presents no doubt His Majesty is eagerly awaiting!" grinned Pilgrim.

II

The first day up the river was the channel crowded with waterfowl, whose plumage patined the water with a flaked iridescence that broke at the passing of the canoes. It was the reedy backwaters above which—like rhododendrons in the gardens of Triton Lodge—the roseate clusters of flamingo lifted their pale fire. It was the silver and gilt of the crested crane, making a clear,

fountain-like jet of crystal in the dark and swampy cane-beds that fringed the forest. The constant, bejewelled flash of the kingfishers under the banks, the dragonflies that waited on the broad, flat lily-leaves the moment of inspiration to launch their darts of blue and emerald fire across the stream, were part of a world of magic that Matthew was too engrossed to observe.

Slowly, as the sun mounted, the life of the creek quickened; crocodiles dragged their prehistoric forms out of the water, to bask in the heat that drew up the humidity of night from the sandbanks and hung the matted vegetation of the forest with a brief luminosity, through which trees and branches and downward-hanging roots took on the delicate unreality of some subaqueous scene. But this early-morning mistiness was quickly dispelled; as the light beneath the trees became more brilliantly green, more intolerably golden outside the patches of shade, the insect life of the jungle picked up its day-time activity, the air filled itself with a humming and a buzzing that was trumpeted from lush corollas of magenta and livid blue, whose down-dropping clusters were agitated by the unseen gambols of apes overhead. A hippopotamus lurched with grotesque timidity into the papyrus swamp, and sea-birds rose in shoals from the mud plateaux on which they laid their eggs. Close to the water's edge, a low bush appeared to be covered with small, shining plates of pewter-grey metal, like armour, like a fish's scales; a continual vibration of light on the scales welded the whole into some effect of restless unity—but it was thousands of beetles, new-broken from the chrysalis, waiting for the sun to dry their wings.

On Pilgrim's suggestion, they shot some of the birds; the guns tore the curious texture of silence that was not silence, the web of small, warm sound fringed with the silver drip of the paddles, with a crude noise of explosion; for a moment it was all a clapping of wings, shrill chatter, shaking of branches; then silence came flowing back, the rent slowly healed, the rhythm of the forest returned.

The creek, as they advanced, became thick with floating weed, the wash of the canoes pleated the slow water in folds of yellowish green against the base of the reeds that rocked at their passage. The heat now started to become insupportable; it was like warm, wet flannel pressed close to their faces. Gigantic blue flies, like bluebottles, fastened persistently upon the soaked garments of the white men.

Night, when it came, was harsh with the booming of bullfrogs, and the dark trees had closed in overhead, so that nothing was visible of the sky. For the last hour Matthew had been conscious of a faint sensation of claustrophobia, such as a man may get in a long, underground tunnel. Every now and then, in the rapidly increasing dark, came the opalescent gleam of a pair of eyes. Ongwe the interpreter told them that there were "plenty leopard," and four camp-fires were lighted, one at either end of the long shoal where they camped, two between the camp and the forest: so that a crimson half-circle formed itself, roofed with smoke, which the foliage above them kept down.

This was the first day, all blurred, for Matthew, by his savage dissatisfaction at the outcome of his encounter with Montcalm, his resentment of Pleydell's interference, and his gnawing desire for Sheba, whose dark, deceptive phantom ran naked through his dreams.

III

The second day was wet green twilight, between hanging mats of vine that seemed impenetrable to man or beast: vine that flung occasional trailers across their path, or lowered upon them green, twisted ropes, thicker than ship's cable. They rarely caught a glimpse of tree, never of sky. The undergrowth was woven into a tapestry-like screen, broken here and there as though some large animal had forced its way through. Behind the screen, as dawn widened, came noises of wakening birds, desperate flurries, the savage chatter of apes. For a long time they saw nothing but owls, sitting motionless, sunk in their grey down, grave guardians between night and day, and an occasional snake, thick as a man's arm, that made a mere flash of green and yellow across their path before shooting into the tangle on either side.

The second day was a jog-trot procession of naked backs, the polished slipperiness of moving muscles, the deep, abdominal grunt of the burdened negro. Their passage through the jungle became more and more the passage through the vast, twisted intestine of some antediluvian monster; the heat was that of a Turkish bath, flies were innumerable, and from time to time they passed through zones where the fœtid stench of rotting vegetation caught the breath in their throats, and there was an almost visible miasma.

The second day was crossing the dry bed of a stream, and climbing a shaly hillside in the full blaze of afternoon sun: for one step forward, sliding back three. It was a subtle increase in every one's watchfulness, with Ongwe's announcement that there were "plenty wild beast about." They saw leopard down in the ravine, and Pilgrim had difficulty in dissuading Matthew from the folly of adding a second ascent to the still undetermined sum of the day's effort. It was a detour round a lagoon, which seemed to be the breeding-place of crocodile; the backs of the creatures formed a raft for the small, dark birds that hopped unconcernedly in and out of the gaping jaws, picking the crocodiles' teeth for the scraps of fish on which they fed their young. It was a strange, crimson light of sunset—and a lioness, who, swinging her gaunt flanks, came down to drink on the farther side of the lagoon. She was old and mangy, her udders swung dry under her emaciated belly. "No good for the pot," said Pilgrim, ignoring the boys' excitement, and their evident desire he should shoot.

They were tired that night, when they reached the broad clearing beside a stream of clear water, in which Matthew and Pilgrim were glad to steep their swollen and aching feet. Both were in agony; the rims of Pilgrim's eyes were bitten away, his eyeballs and even the iris itself the colour of fresh blood. They had come into a cloud of little flies, so small as almost to be invisible, that closed like a spotted veil upon the party, crusting themselves round eyes, mouths and noses. Matthew had not suffered quite so badly, having bound a handkerchief about his brows at the first onslaught of the pests, which, though they crawled and flew under the improvised protection, had not played havoc with his face as they had done with Pilgrim's. He had, however, been bitten in the calf, and the whole of his leg, from knee to ankle, was so swollen and inflamed that walking was a penance. Several of the carriers had suffered similarly, and those who were sound employed themselves in hunting for

plants whose sap was commonly used for the relief of these familiar discomforts.

This was the second day—at the end of which they might have been three hundred, instead of, as the crow flies, a bare thirty miles from the coast. The conception of their journey as a pleasure trip had faded even from Pilgrim's sanguine mind; there is nothing so calculated to reduce a man's belief in himself as the petty methods employed by the jungle to maintain its inviolability: a stinging fly, a cloud of midges.

They were Jonah in the whale's maw; around and about them went on, invisible, the inexplicable movements of a vast, mysterious organism, of a gargantuan digestive tract, whose imperceptible contractions and belchings of effete air kept them in continual reminder of their helplessness. This sense of helplessness had the effect of breaking down the slight formality which Pilgrim's diffidence and Matthew's preoccupation had forced on their relationship. By the end of the second day each felt that he knew the other very well, and Matthew was glad of Pilgrim's sturdy companionship, his good sense, tact and instinct for self-obliteration, when Matthew wanted to be left to his own gloomy thoughts.

IV

The third day, for both, was a day of nightmare. The farther they went inland, the more violently luxurious became the vegetation, and, as Montcalm had warned him, the track was all but overgrown when they reached it. Pilgrim's eyes were still red, but he declared they did not trouble him; he took his share in hacking away the tangle that obstructed their advance, but by his evident exhaustion at the end of a couple of hours, Matthew was reminded that he was only just over a fever bout. They had both sweated off the meagre flesh that covered their bones, and their eyes stared defiance from caverns of darkness in faces the sun had burned badly the previous day, when they were climbing the hillside.

In the heart of the forest they passed a kaffle of slaves on their way down to the creek. They were in the most pitiful condition, and it seemed as though half of them might die before getting to the canoes. Pilgrim spoke to the overseers, and was told they were bound for Christiansburg, the Danish fort between Accra and Fort James, their nearest neighbour. Pilgrim scowled as he saw the piteous and feeble state of many of the women, several of whom were pregnant, and one, near her time, who kept crouching down to the earth between her compassionate companions, who, despite the dragging of the chain, tried to remain still for a few seconds to give her ease.

"It's the bloodiest shameful trade in the world!" broke out Pilgrim, as the kaffle moved on. "And I'll thank my stars when I'm free of it."

"When will that be?" asked Matthew, ignoring an aspect of the subject upon which he preferred not to dwell.

"Next year, I hope. Ay, it will have to be next year." A fold of flesh thickened between Pilgrim's rough brows. "I'd hoped to make it earlier, but things haven't quite worked out that way." Matthew noted sharply the delicacy which prevented Pilgrim from explaining outright that he had not yet saved enough money.

"What takes you back to England?" he asked, while they rested before the afternoon trek.

"Well," said Pilgrim—he had dropped the "sir," though not the respectfulness of his manner of address; and this also brought them nearer together. "Apart from the fact that almost any country would be heaven after the Coast, and that my roots, as they say, are in British soil—I've got a responsibility it's high time I looked to. A—a little girl," he stammered, with a sheepish, sidelong look that flinched from the cynicism of Matthew's smile. "You've got no children of your own, Mr. Flood?" he challenged.

"Your *child*?"

Pilgrim's lips slanted wryly.

"I'm not sure. But at any rate, the poor brat's got no one but me to look after her. I put her with some folk I knew, before coming out here, but they're elderly, and it's maybe no life for a moppet of three or four. If I can find work, and a woman to look after the pair of us——"

"What was your work, Pilgrim?"

"I wasn't badly placed, sir: as clerk in Holtway's bank the prospects were good, if slow in maturing. One has to have patience . . ."

"Good God! You threw that up, to come out here?"

"It threw me up. Holtway's is a very old, respectable bank, and after the scandal—it's not worth going over. London folk don't understand how a business like that can ruin you, in a small town."

"I'm from Bristol."

"A grand city, Bristol!" The light eyes glinted. "And close to the sea. I've always had a taste for the sea—but I was surely crazy to take that passage out here, not fully knowing what lay at the end of it. By God, I've learned things out here! Maybe one's better for knowing them. . . ."

"You haven't told me what sent you," put in Matthew, as the other paused.

"It's an ord'nary tale: short commons at home, a smart, pretty girl that got tired of putting new ribands on old gowns—and a flash jack-pudding that fanned the dissatisfaction. Then one day, when things weren't going too well, I met Master Fly-by-Night in the High Street and something happened. I can't tell you what; it was like a flash of lightning that went ripping through my head. I knew I couldn't let the pair of them go on putting horns on me—and I knocked him through the nearest window. Well, you couldn't expect the bank to take no notice of that!"

"Or your wife. What did she say?"

"When I got back from jail—where she'd never answered my letters or troubled herself to see me—there was an empty house and a five months baby crying in its cradle. A neighbour said she'd been looking after it, but the poor toad was sick with hunger and verminous with neglect. Mr. Flood, do you know how one can love and hate a person at the same time? I was starving for my wife, but I could have killed her when I looked at that baby. Ay, I'd have killed her that night as easy as you'd squash a fly.

"Well, I'd no work and no money, and no one 'ud employ me, because it was a very creeping-jenny sort of place: full of mock religionists, if you know what I mean—folk that go nosing out other people's business and using the information for their own ends. There was a Methodist parson that always had his hand up some wench's petticoats, but made a criminal example of me—

of *me*, mind you!—in his pulpit the following Sunday. That determined me to get out, so I did the best I could for the little girl and went to Liverpool. And there I fell in with some slave-trade fellows, and—well, I was in the mood for taking a chance.”

“Have you regretted it?”

“No, I can’t say I have,” said Pilgrim slowly. “It’s hard to put into words—but it seems like this: it’s not till a man comes up against things that he finds himself. There’s nothing to be said against clerking, which is an honest, simple way of getting one’s living; but it don’t stretch you, it don’t put muscles on you. I’m not talking physical, but my vocabulary isn’t equal to what I’m trying to say. I could quite as easily have rotted away in Watford as the climate might have rotted me here: without the satisfaction of having a fight for it.”

“I can help you, if you like, when you go back,” Matthew found himself saying, with a sudden, poignant realization of his altered state. He had not stayed long enough in England to get used to the exercise of influence, the bestowal of patronage, that went hand in hand with his inheritance. He who, when poor, had had so little diffidence, discovered a sudden shyness in seeming to exploit his position before one who had made no appeal for his help. The proud and upright simplicity of Pilgrim’s character reproached him, and at the same time increased his liking for his companion. “Come to Bristol, Pilgrim, and get in touch with me. Or, if I’m not there, go to my lawyer, Shergill; I’ll give you a letter you can present if need arises. Between us we can surely help you to get a footing in a town too busy to concern itself with your past.”

“You mean that, sir? You’ll stand by it?” The man’s voice shook with his excitement and gratitude. He began to stammer his thanks, which Matthew dismissed brusquely.

“Save that for later. Don’t you feel all those things have an outlandish sound—here? God, Pilgrim, haven’t you wondered, the last hour or two, what it must be like to be lost in these trees? One wouldn’t have a chance in a million, if one left the beaten track.”

Pilgrim turned to look about him, with a smile of almost childish happiness on his face.

“Maybe it’s a foolish observation—but—it shows how you’ve lifted me up, sir, with the promise you’ve just given me! If a ship was waiting now, to take me back to England—to that moppet I’ve left behind me in Watford—I lay I could walk through that greenery as if it was muslin, as straight as an arrow’d go, if a giant shot it from here to the coast!”

What a fool you must be, so easily to be made content!—was on the tip of Matthew’s tongue, but something held back the bitter and ungracious words. It had always been his way to despise people of small ambitions; he now wondered whether they had a secret satisfaction to which he, in all his plenty, could never aspire. Such doubts had troubled him lately; they had something to do with the invisible trees, the lost sky, the screens of creeper that seemed expressly created to reduce human confidence, to impress on man his lack of importance, his transience in a world that went on for ever. If the first did not harm him, it was for no lack of malevolence, but for contempt of his trivial pretensions.

The melancholy impression left by the slave kaffle was more than atoned

for by the fact that they had cleared the remainder of the route. They reached the "big river" less than an hour after the midday rest.

Three canoes, instead of two, awaited them, smaller and lighter than those which had brought them up the creek. Pilgrim had the cases of ammunition loaded into the one in which he and Matthew, with the interpreter, would travel; the rest of the baggage, the provisions and the carriers were stowed in the others.

The relief of being paddled, after the painful overland journey, was almost too exquisite to be borne; the baggage canoes leading, they swung out into mid-stream, and the stroke of the paddles, the smooth ripple of the water on either side added to the enchantment of a scene which became more and more exotic as they advanced up the river. It was not closed in, like the majority of streams in that part of the country; between the canoes and the sky were festooned galaxies of bloom fantastical as one might find at a feria, through which darted humming birds and butterflies no less brilliant and no smaller than the largest of the flowers.

The rowers started to sing. Matthew had noted they were a shorter, lighter, more volatile breed than the factory boys. Their voices were soft, melancholic, smooth as honey, with sweet, sober cadences that timed the dip of the paddles. With the approach of dusk, even the plague of flies ceased; the fat monsters who had gorged themselves with blood slowly disappeared, and the mosquitoes had hardly started their malicious activity. It was an idyllic interlude, if brief; Pilgrim, turning to Matthew, apologised with a grin for what he was about to say.

"I suppose this is what most folks mean when they talk of paradise! Who'd believe, that hadn't seen it?"

"Paradise without Eve!" Matthew was half asleep, his eyes were closed, and for the last ten minutes he had been thinking of Sheba. With her beside him, to interpret all of the colour, all of the sound, to add significance to it all by the touch of the smooth, dark flash—what carnival it would have been! They should have gone together through the forest, naked and proud; he, through virtue of her dark flesh, no cringing outlaw, but part of the power and mystery around them.

"We'll pay for it."

"Pay for what?" The muttered words penetrated his sultry dream.

"For taking 'em away from this; for giving 'em—what we give them in place of their butterflies, their flower gardens and their singing up the river," was the grim reply.

"Not to speak of their insects, their wild beasts and their human enemies." Matthew turned on his elbow, smiling lazily and friendly at his companion. "You know, Pilgrim, there are times when you seem to forget who you're talking to!"

"I don't forget it," answered Pilgrim sturdily. "And if I'm too free with my opinions for your taste, I'm sorry. But I don't want to sail under false colours, Mr. Flood. If my views, being at variance with your own, give you any cause to regret the offer you've just made me, sir, don't give it another thought. It's enough you've given me proof of your good will—a thing sufficiently valuable to a man who's got to start his life all over again."

"Don't be a fool. I only trust you aren't going to associate yourself with

our enemies the Abolitionists; as that would certainly cramp the sympathies of many folks whose interest I might try to enlist on your behalf."

Pilgrim shook his head.

"I'm having no truck with that lot, who seem likely, by their way of going about it, to do more harm than good. No, sir; when I'm out of the trade I'll have no more to do with it—for or against; it's not seemly, any way, to run down a job that's done you service. Look over there, at those fireflies. Like Charles's Wain, though a few too many; but that's the pattern. Well, I'll have tales to tell my Fanny that'll beat anything she'll read in story books, after they've taught her her letters."

At nightfall they reached the shallow. The river had widened tremendously. Matthew judged it was at least a quarter of a mile from the channel to the farther bank. The channel itself hugged the western shores, which were thick with mangrove, and round which the mosquitoes swarmed, and viciously attacked the occupants of the canoes; but as they went on the swamps receded, and where the hard, bright moon showed a stretch of apparently impeccable hand, they camped for the night.

It was on the fourth day they knew they were being followed .

V

On the fourth day they were in a green tunnel, whose roof was so low that neither Matthew nor Pilgrim could stand upright. On the left there was bank, with thick undergrowth and the swinging, pipe-shaped nests whose tiny occupants hopped in and out of the hollow woven tubes; on the right there was nothing but the water sagging round the tree boles that formed complicated aisles and alleyways until they were lost in the obscurity of the forest. Apart from snakes and birds, they saw no living creatures. The channel was very shallow: from time to time the paddles struck and disturbed some foetid mass that released an incredibly evil and persistent odour of decay.

They had been travelling about two hours, when each received, and communicated to the other by glances, that unmistakable sense of danger that depends purely on instinct, and has no material proof to offer of its existence.

"There's one good thing at least; we've not got two banks to think about," muttered Pilgrim, looking to see if the natives were uneasy. There was no singing, but the rowers were stolidly doing their duty. The canoes took a delicate, zigzag course along the narrow channel; now and again a hoarse shout from the leading one gave warning of a fallen tree or a rotten branch, past which it was necessary to manœuvre the canoes by thrusting on the bank, while the offside rowers fended off the obstacle with hands or paddles.

"Are there enemy tribes in this quarter?"

"Nothing less likely. We must be in Omo country by now, and Omo's put the fear of God into his neighbours and keeps his eye on the rest." His own eye rested reflectively on the rowers. "Besides, if it was that, the niggers would have got it; they're as cute as cats. They aren't bothering—except for getting us clear along the channel. Ongwe was telling me," he added on a louder note, "there's a shoal farther up, where we'll have to get out, and they may have to carry the canoes."

"Can Ongwe shoot?"

"Both he and the headman, Iwolo, are supposed to handle guns; it wouldn't be cautious to mention that for the present."

"Why not? Give them guns. and say we want anything they can pick up for the pot." It was a reasonable suggestion, for the better part of their eating, so far, had been provided by the birds and small game shot by the white men, supplemented from the streams, where the boys proved themselves expert fishermen.

Guns and powder flasks were handed along, which gave much gratification to their grinning recipients, who signified, however, that on this stretch of water there was little to be picked up for the pot. "Higher up—past the dry place," they promised.

It is not easy to keep watch without appearing to do so; Matthew and Pilgrim kept up a desultory conversation, but their nerves were like strung catgut. The quite inexplicable sensation of being observed in every gesture, every movement so governed the pair of them that their limbs ached with consciousness. In the almost supernatural silence of the tunnel, that was only disturbed by the wash of the water, by an occasional grunt or ejaculation from the rowers, every sound magnified its importance, a dead twig falling seemed portentous, a bird's swift, sudden flight across their track charged itself with absurd significance.

They reached the shoal, where the canoes had to be emptied and the baggage carried along the bank, while the rowers lifted their craft over the shaly bottom. Matthew's spine tingled as he stepped out on the bank. They had only gone a few yards when he realized that Pilgrim had placed himself, as though by accident, between him and the undergrowth. Matthew deliberately fell behind; when Pilgrim dropped back to join him, he started ahead. Their progress was therefore a rather absurd manœuvring for position, which, by its very absurdity, helped to relieve the tension.

All the same, when they stared off on the next stretch of water, each knew, unmistakably, that the observation had drawn closer.

"Are there any more shoals?"

Ongwe translated this to the head canoe-boy, who answered that there was one more, "half day ahead."

"If you do that trick again, I'll knock your head off."

"What trick?"

"Getting between me and the trees. We take equal chances."

The level eyes met Matthew's squarely.

"You maybe haven't thought why every one has taken such interest in your safety up-river."

"Faugh! Because I'm a rich man, an owner. You see how much impression that makes here!" He pointed to his still swollen leg, which was so painful that he could not walk without limping, and to the inflamed knobs the flies had left on his arms and neck. "Nature at least has the sense not to distinguish between persons!" He forgot that there had been occasions when he himself was anxious enough to profit by such distinctions.

Pilgrim, who, unknown to Matthew, had had a long talk with the Governor on the night before their departure, stammered a little as he went on: "You must know—a person like yourself cannot fail to know—that hundreds of people depend on you, and would suffer if—if any harm came to you."

Excuse me; it's—it's a point the Governor asked me to call to your remembrance," he added, more than ever abashed by Matthew's cold stare, "if you should be disposed to engage on any unnecessarily rash enterprise."

It was a point of view to which Matthew himself had not yet given a thought. The immense liberation and relief the money had brought had banished for the time all sense of the responsibilities included in his inheritance. That Pleydell should be the one—albeit by proxy—to call them to his attention did not sweeten the reminder.

"What about yourself?" He evaded the point at issue. "What about that little Fanny of yours, who's got no one but you in the world? I should have thought your duty was much plainer than mine—who have not a soul to care, except for what they can get out of me."

"That can't be true, sir! And——"

"Mind your own business, Pilgrim," said Matthew. "On my return to England I'll be obliged to look into my commitments; for the present, I disown them. I am concerned only with settling this Omo business, which will certainly affect my future dealings with the Coast. To bring it off successfully I shall take all reasonable measures of prudence. But when those measures involve the safety of others, I'm determined to reserve my independence." It had a petulant, immature sound; Matthew, ashamed, was glad when silence swallowed it.

... Later on, imagination began to play tricks with them. Matthew could have sworn he saw a body dodging behind the trunk of a tree. Pilgrim heard a swishing of boughs which, he declared, could only have been caused by someone stumbling. But nothing appeared, and when night fell they camped on a low island, sparsely wooded. It is to be taken for granted that neither slept. With the coming of dawn "it" seemed to be very near indeed; it seemed incredible "it" should not be visible.

V I

The next day's journey—their fifth day from the coast—seemed like eternity. For all their discretion, their uneasiness had spread to the natives. Bows and arrows appeared—they did not know from where—and lay at the rowers' feet. The ceiling had lifted; there were even green funnels up which they could look, as up enormous chimneys, at the far, ever so far away sky; and they were moving much more quickly. The channel had deepened, but, in counteraction of this obvious benefit, the waterway itself had narrowed, and there was now bank on either side. Ongwe told Pilgrim there were at least three more days' journey, perhaps four, before them.

It now seemed as though the Enemy was keeping exact pace with them; as the canoes went smoothly between the tapestry of either bank, it seemed to move parallel with them. Yet there was never a sound, never a sign. Matthew had almost reached the point of persuading himself it was hallucination, born of his inexperience, of the brooding, immobile watchfulness of the forest, which had begun to tear at his nerves. It was impossible, however, to rid himself of the impression that their least significant gesture was noted and stored in a brain that moved like fate behind the screen of leaves.

"Why not surprise them with a raid? There are four guns, and the boys' arrows."

Pilgrim shook his head.

"It's a thousand to one you'd get them, and it's no good wasting ammunition. I've been watching the trees for the last half-hour; they're thinning. That means our friends will either come out into the open, or attack before the bank clears." He spoke in the vernacular to Ongwe, whose chattering reply, and the restlessness of the roving eyeballs showed them clearly enough their uneasiness was shared by the interpreter.

"It's as I thought. We come into open country presently—it's no good asking how far; they measure only by days. But it will be to-day. So we may as well get ready. He knows we're armed—he knew that last night, when the boys were shooting duck; so he won't risk the clearing. He can't leave it till to-morrow, because there's at least a chance Omo will send an escort down to meet us; so it will likely be this afternoon—"

The words were hardly spoken when there came overhead a soft, singing whirr and a tiny splash. The feathered head of an arrow went floating downstream. They had not time to mark where the arrow came from, but its position suggested it was from the left bank.

Half the boys had flung down their paddles and seized their bows; the others urged the canoes on with the utmost strength of their arms. The Coast boys were yelling; the leaves gave back a dry swish as a rain of arrows sped into them.

"Save your shooting and lie low!" was Pilgrim's counsel to Matthew. The two men lay flat, with the barrels of their guns resting on the gunwale.

Something to their surprise, there was no response. They grew cramped—Matthew in particular, with his huge limbs flattened into the narrow space of the hull. The canoes were now leaping recklessly through the water ("We're done if we hit a root!"), and a wide bend showed them suddenly the stretch of open bank ahead.

"It's now or never!"

Matthew was sure afterwards that he had heard the clip of the released bowstring; but neither saw the shaft as it mounted upward, upward—alas, for the once-sheltering trees—to turn over in mid-air and fall like a plummet. Both saw it in the last seconds of its descent, and Matthew flung himself sideways with a lunge that all but capsized them. He heard Pilgrim give a grunt.

There was a second when he could not believe it: the sight of the long, feathered shaft quivering in just below Pilgrim's shoulder blade, the red drop, no bigger than the ace of hearts, that appeared at the base of the shaft, and spread a very little. He could not believe it, when he heard Pilgrim whisper:

"He's got the wrong man—never mind—my Fanny—don't touch me——" and went limp in the bottom of the canoe. He had only the sense to remain crouching while the arrows flew from the speeding canoes that shot, as though propelled by devils, from the tunnel into open water.

Then he wanted to touch Pilgrim, but Ongwe, gibbering with fear and excitement, prevented him, and when they turned Pilgrim over, he guessed why. He remembered—among many other things—a talk with Pleydell about native poisons, and the juice in which native hunters dipped their arrows.

VII

That night he was alone, under the African moon. He still felt that it was all unreal, an invention, from which truth would presently emerge.

There were the camp-fires, and, in one of the canoes, beached close to the farthest fire, Pilgrim's body, rolled in a cloth. The ground there was too hard to give it burial, and he had refused, despite the chattering protests of Ongwe, to sink it in the river. He would take it up to Omo, if necessary; meanwhile, his gaze covered the canoe, his gun was ready.

The camp was restless that night; the natives knew, better than Matthew, the danger of keeping a freshly dead body where the beasts of the forest could surely scent it. Not only that, they were terrified of the evil spirits the presence of a corpse would bring about them. Drums beat round the fires, a death conjo had started. Matthew watched it from afar, thinking of the last time he heard the drums, saw the leaping figures. That moment seemed infinitely far away.

They had brought his pack up from the canoe and placed it beside him. Inside there was Pleydell's copy of Dryden's *All for Love*, which he had picked up to beguile a sleepless night, and, half ironically, had pocketed for the sake of such lines as—

“I have loved with such transcendent passion
I soared at first quite out of reason's view
And now am lost above it.”

It was another passage that now revived in his memory:

“My torch is out; and the world stands before me
Like a black desert at the approach of night;
I'll lay me down, and stray no farther on.”

The voice of conscience, sounding through the drums, told him the truth at last: that he had sacrificed a comrade to his rage and his vanity, and to the implacable greed that had sent him up to Omo. The treaty with Omo that meant more money for Flood's. Flood's? *He* was Flood's. In the black night his importance came near to him: and his insignificance. *He* was the nexus round which spun wheels whose golden revolutions made him dizzy to contemplate; he was the king-pin on which a structure a hundred times greater than himself depended. And the king-pin was made of faulty metal.

Presently he felt in his pack and pulled out the book. He turned to the empty fly-leaf, and, using a charred twig from the fire, wrote:

“Pallas. There is a child called Fanny Pilgrim whom I want you to find. She lives in Watford. She is the daughter of my friend, who was killed at my side to-day, in the forest.”

He waited a long time, before signing his name, but there seemed no more to say. The book could be sent to her later, but if he had not written it then
S.M.U. K

the message might never have been sent. He knew himself well enough for that; knew that a cry like that could only come *de profundis*, that to-morrow he might even be ashamed of it. But he swore, whatever might be his later sentiments, to send the book. Its very title—*All for Love*—might stir something in her cold, guarded heart. What but love, scorned and crucified, had brought him to these malign shores? And if he ever saw little Fanny Pilgrim, he would tell her her father had had decent burial, if in far, foreign land.

So the night wore on, with terrible bellowings from forest beasts, with gleaming of eyes and endless paddings up and down on the farther side of the camp-fires; and in the morning there was a frightful outcry, for the ants, more determined than the greater creatures, had got at the canoe.

In billions they poured over it, the very woodwork quivered with their small, restless red-and-brown. A carpet of ants, a yard wide, lay from the edge of the forest to the canoe; it was like the outpouring of an inexhaustible spring.

The natives yelled with horror and fled from its proximity; some, already bitten, were screaming with pain and flinging themselves into the water. None of Matthew's threats or curses could drive them near it; they were already pushing the other canoes into the streams. There were shrill cries and fighting, for there was not nearly enough accommodation in the two sound canoes for the whole of the party.

It was Matthew himself, his arms and body pin-points of fire, who dragged what remained of the cloth out of the dazzling pile. He might have spared himself the trouble. The skeleton lay there, picked clean as ivory. The sight of Pilgrim's skull, with ants running in and out of the eye-sockets, might almost have turned his brain, had he not been clapping his hands here, there, everywhere, in the attempt to rid himself of the pests. He plunged into the water. The last thing he saw consciously was the flames of the burning canoe, on which Ongwe and Iwolo had flung the remains of the burnt-out camp-fires. He spent twenty-four hours in delirium, while the headman drove the reluctant boys into building another.

CHAPTER VII

I

WHEN he felt his strength starting to come back to him—stretched on the mats they had spread a foot deep on the floor of trodden earth—and he began to distinguish one from another the people who ministered to him, Matthew's first distinct thought was one of respect and admiration for these tribesmen and tribeswomen of Omo who, at their ruler's command, had nursed him through his sickness.

A dozen or more of young women carried out with admirable efficiency the dictates of the witch doctor—a horrific personage whose withdrawn presence was part of the nightmare of illness: whose entrance brought into the hut the overwhelming stench of carrion, and involved processes whose primitive crudity made Matthew doubtful whether he had not dreamt the whole thing. This was the king's own doctor, and the most powerful magician along the river—so he was informed, while submitting himself to the application of nauseous poultices and swallowing potations of whose exact ingredients he was mercifully kept in ignorance.

In addition to those whose express duty it was to attend on him he was visited each day by the king's emissaries: a group of lofty youths who came with ceremony, to lean on their spears and silently observe the progress of Omo's guest. Even among the Eboes who worked for Pleydell, Matthew had never seen such physical perfection; it was a little galling to lie there, bearded and weak as a rat, under the fathomless regard of these visitors, who silently retired, to bear the report of their inspection back to Omo.

Through the interpreter he conveyed at last his intention of paying his delayed visit to the king. The women bathed and anointed him; fresh linen was produced from his pack; and, preceded by the gifts—for which, with *naïveté*, Omo had already been inquiring—he was carried on a native palanquin provided by his host to the royal palace.

Under the arcade formed by the rough-hewn tree-trunks that supported its spreading roof, Omo waited formally, with his head men and wives about him, and Matthew, as he descended from the palanquin, lost at one glance his previous conception of the negro as an eccentric and subhuman freak of creation, and advanced towards the young man whom he felt, in that glance, to be his equal, not merely in stature but in those qualities belonging to a governing race.

Omo stepped forward; his was the tiger's grace, the tiger's pride of bearing. The great white mantle, clasped with bosses of gold, flowed back from the broad shoulders, making a snowy background for limbs of polished ebony, whose only covering was the narrow clout whose ends, weighted with the fringe of dried grass, swung against the negro's knees. On the lofty, moss-covered head a Manchester-made crown of punctured tin detracted nothing from the dignity of the superb figure that stepped from the shade of the porch to receive Omo's guest.

A little doubtful of correct procedure, Matthew bowed, and waved forward the interpreter to make his speech of presentation. Evidently Ongwe made a good business of it, for, as the speech went on, Omo's expression, which had been proud, almost insufferable in its reserve, changed; his lips broke apart in a glittering smile. It was a friendly and satisfied youth who stood there, in place of the arrogant ruler, and, catching Matthew's arm suddenly in a powerful hand, Omo poured out a stream of questions, whose object, Ongwe explained, was his guest's well-being, his recovery from the unfortunate state in which he had arrived at the village.

Still in the king's clasp, Matthew was drawn into the shadow of the palace, was given a seat, while the king's wives brought refreshment, and the examination of the presents, which were laid out on the porch, started. In these Omo took as much pleasure as a small boy with his birthday treat. His chatter, his eager exploration of each item and his unblushing greed amused Matthew, who, unlike some of his own countrymen, had the wit to realize that this childishness was only a single facet of a character curiously subtle, and developed beyond that of most of his contemporaries, which had given Omo his overlordship in the tribe.

Here was a youth born to rule, and to make his will law among his people; and here was one who could appreciate these powers, and even envy them, for they came close to the heart of his own desire. The two products, one of African forest and the other of European sophistication, eyed each other with smiling friendliness—not wholly without reservations on either side: for Matthew had come for concessions, and Omo knew it; and both knew he would obtain them, but Omo wondered to what extent he should give way, and Matthew to what extent it would be prudent to push his demands. Across cups carved out of coco-nut and filled with traders' rum they eyed each other, and gave each other credit for his qualities.

II

One of the things which interested Matthew was the form of jurisdiction practised by Omo. He had been informed that the punishment meted out by the native rulers for any crime was to sell the criminal, male or female, to the slave-traders. When he managed to convey this to Omo, the latter smiled broadly and shook his head. There were many rulers, he admitted, who followed this practice; it was indeed the rule, rather than the exception, in present times, when the poorer, greedier kings wanted all they could get of European commodities, in particular liquor, and would sell their own flesh and blood to obtain them. His tribe was an old one, Omo explained, and his town enjoyed the privileged form of government which had been laid down by the old kings, his forefathers. When he required an increase of personal revenue, he sent out his hunters to break up a village, or he started a war; these, he explained, were the proper and recognized means of keeping up the necessary flow of traffic between the interior and the coast. He invited Matthew to attend a "law palaver"—an invitation which the latter was delighted to accept, and which, in the course of a long, hot morning, very appreciably increased his respect for Omo.

The majority of the offenders were up for petty theft, for which the penalty was restitution of the stolen goods and payment of a fine; but Matthew remarked that one of the fellows paid no fine and was ordered away in charge of an officer. He questioned Ongwe.

"Dat fella po' man; no hab money for pay."

"What do they do? Jail him?"

Ongwe shook his head.

"Makeum slabe fo' de head man." It was the first Matthew had heard of slavery among the natives themselves. He also made mental correction of a previous misconception—that theft among the blacks, far from being a crime, was honourable and rewarded: this being confined, he later discovered, to Issini, and held nowhere along the Gold Coast.

He remarked that Omo's judgments, which were brief and dispassionate, were invariably received with signs of satisfaction; moreover, that there was no sycophancy about the grunts of approval that greeted his decisions. It was the apotheosis of absolute kingship, and it stirred Matthew's admiration, and, to a certain extent, his envy. He realized more and more clearly, as the trials proceeded, the folly of the European attitude to this grave and powerful young king, and convinced him of Omo's value as an ally.

A case of adultery was the high spot of the trials, and the hum of conversation that went on through the previous cases, dropped to an almost complete silence when the offending parties were brought into the open space in front of the king's throne. The woman, a well-built, although (to Matthew's mind) not otherwise attractive young female, hung her head with a kind of sullen shame; it was evident she was pregnant, and he remembered that a husband could not divorce his wife unless he caught her *in flagrante delicto*. The man—he wondered if it was husband or lover—was a short, broad negro of peculiarly repellent aspect.

Ongwe leaned over to whisper excitedly:

"Dat woman one of de king's wives!"

Omo appeared to take the matter philosophically; his judgment was evidently prepared, for he did not even trouble to address the peccant couple. At a laconic sign from their ruler, two men stepped forward from beyond the throne; each carried a short hunting-knife, at which the male offender looked in evident terror. He was ordered to advance, and in obedience to a muttered command from Omo's head man, laid on the cloth spread at the latter's feet a small leather bag, which was emptied and weighed in the same unnatural silence. *That's not Anamaboe gold!* thought Matthew, as the sun smote the metal and brought out its purity.

A solemn division took place: five parts to His Majesty, in his dual capacity as king and injured husband, and one part to the state. It amused Matthew to see Omo's unabashed haggling over the weighing, which had to be twice repeated before he was satisfied of its fairness. When this was settled, the co-respondent's head was clipped in between two pieces of board, shaped something like the headboard of a stocks, and his two ears neatly and swiftly cut off by the men with knives.

It was done so quickly, with so little ado or ceremony, that Matthew caught his breath, while a tremendous hullabaloo broke out that mingled shouts of acclamation with the shrieks of the victim and the dreary howling of his

female accomplice. Paying no attention to any of it, and with all appearance of good humour, Omo ended the palaver by stepping down from the porch and laying his hand in friendly fashion on Matthew's shoulder. There was something Olympian in the gesture: "See how I avenge my injuries, and how little importance I lend to it!"

He learned later, from Ongwe, that Omo had not come at all badly out of it.

"What happens to the woman?" Matthew had the curiosity to inquire. Ongwe grinned broadly.

"She pay much fine; many sheep, many goat."

When Matthew asked whether this meant that Omo, as titular husband, paid "many sheep, many goat" to himself, the Eboe shook his head. "She go back to her family, they pay," he explained. He also volunteered, as a possible means of entertainment, that the burning of the house where the adulterous intercourse took place would be performed at nightfall, in the presence of all the townsfolk: this being a sufficiently rare and exciting event to afford pretext for a conjó.

It now appeared that Omo was prepared to fling off his cares of rulership with his royal robes. He challenged Matthew, through the interpreter, to a matching of physical prowess, that gained the amused approval of the king's bodyguard of young warriors, who were, however, too self-conscious to risk their own credit in the tests set each other by host and guest.

At hurling a hewn tree-trunk Omo was Matthew's superior, but Matthew beat him in the long jump that ended in the sandpit by the landing for canoes. In high jumping Omo was easily his master; the elastic limbs of the negro shot him like a catapult over heights it was useless for Matthew to attempt. The bodyguard loudly applauded its master's successes, but was constrained to murmur approval of the guest's achievement when Matthew levelled matters with a back somersault he had some doubts of performing, not having tried such a thing since his boyhood. In the effort to emulate this feat Omo nearly broke his neck, and lay stunned for a moment in the sand, which caused some commotion, and threatened, Matthew felt, not only his popularity but his personal safety. Ordered to repeat the performance, he refused; apart from disinclination to spoil his effect, he had an idea it was not politic to persist in an accomplishment Omo could not imitate. The king might smile, but as king he had a right to his omnipotence. Matthew set a new competition by flinging a stone, and Omo, leaping up with a shout of triumph, hurled one ten yards farther, strutting like a peacock in the sunlight of public applause.

So developed a friendship that knitted itself more closely in the course of a leopard hunt, when Matthew's gun completed the work begun by Omo's arrows. During the feasting round the camp fires, Matthew became aware that Omo was pressing some favour on him. He turned to Ongwe for explanation.

"He bids you take choice of his wives; he pays great compliment."

Matthew felt the return of the flame that had sunk during the days of his sickness. At the end of such a day, in an atmosphere of excitement, of the strongly aphrodisiac food and drink all had partaken, it was natural to want a woman. His eye ran over the comely ranks of the wives: young, sleek, plump, selected for their special qualities as accessories to the king's pleasure. It was impossible to offend Omo by rejecting his offer, yet he felt as little

interest in the prospect of bedding with one of these as with a feather bolster. No, cushiony flesh was not enough. . . . He took one of the girls at random, and took the precaution of plying her with so much liquor that, by the time he took her to his hut she was stupefied, and, had he wanted her, would have been useless to him. She sagged in his arms as they crossed the threshold, and he rolled her into a corner and left her to sleep, while, on his piled matting, he gave himself up to dreams of the Coast—and Sheba.

III

The ceremony of blood-brotherhood, on which Omo insisted, was no more than a courtesy frequently bestowed on white men who were on good terms with the native rulers. Yet, in that moment when their wrists were pressed vein to vein, the blood streams mingling, Matthew had a strange, mystical sensation that went beyond the forms of courtesy: a sense of spiritual comingling, as though more than a few drops of blood passed between him and this friendly savage, who, in another incarnation, might well have been his brother—so close had grown their understanding in the past days. He welcomed, through Omo, an approach to the real heart of Africa, and to the heart of that heart, which, for him, meant Sheba. He felt himself yearning towards her through this man of her own race.

He had, since the meeting with Omo, deliberately discarded Pleydell's warnings against "lowering oneself to equality with the blacks." If to lower oneself was to imbibe their freedom, their superb confidence in themselves and their surroundings, their simple and savage laws that mingled native superstition with a cold justice that was unmatched in any civilization with which Matthew was acquainted—then he had lowered himself.

He had seen nothing that was not admirable since his arrival; the absolute rule of the king, the moral and physical integrity of the people served to build up an ideal which, deriving from nature in its most elemental forms, minimized the powers of civilization, with their small and fussy formulæ, their preoccupation with the essentially unimportant, and emphasized the contrast between itself and the muddle and squalor of the Europeanized colony on the coast. It was here, in the heart of a primitive people, that man came to realization of the full of his manhood—not in obedience to man-made convention, but to natural law, which is power in itself.

To live naked in the forest—within the last few days he had discarded all but the cotton breeches that Pleydell had advised him to have made for this expedition; to put to its full use all of one's physical energy for part of the day, and for the rest to surrender one's energies to the sun, seemed to him the ideal of human existence. Sometimes his mind toyed, half-seriously, with the project of turning all this into a permanency, but, apart from the folly of such dreams, Matthew knew he was not built for indolence, nor for isolation from those strong currents of adventure whose driving force is not physical strength but the brain.

He had already begun to tire a little of the changeless routine of the town which shaped each day into a triangle of which the apex was the evening meal. To hunt, to eat, to sleep was the sum of Omo's day—when he awoke

one morning to an unusual hum of excitement and activity in his surroundings. Dawn had scarcely broken, and when he twitched aside the reed mats, all the pointed roofs of thatch that made a ring about the king's dwelling were faint and delicate with mist, through which the thin spirals of domestic fires were already rising. A deafening noise of parrots screeched from the forest, and under this, and under the sharp cries and brisk thudding of bare feet, went the roll of the drums.

Matthew never heard African drums without feeling their vibration in his blood, but he knew at once a difference in their present note from that which accompanied the conjos: something evil and ominous, which destroyed the peaceful calm he had begun to take for granted.

One of the boys who served him ran past, and, running, cried out a word which Matthew now knew sufficient of the dialect to understand. "War!" he cried, and a thrill went down into the recesses of Matthew's being. At last he was to see Africa militant and dangerous—he reflected contemptuously how different his sojourn in Omo's town had been from that predicted by Pleydell and Abiathar. No English village could have been duller; it had needed but the dong-dong from a Protestant steeple to put the seal on its respectability.

Dragging on his breeches, and rousing the still slumbering Ongwe, he hastened to the king's hut, where, on its farther side, he found Omo reviewing his warriors—a double line of well-built young men, on whose faces and bodies the wet ochre of fresh war-paint glistened. The witch doctor, in some horrible garment fashioned out of the pelt of a newly killed animal, was going down the lines, marking each man with the fresh blood that dripped from the carcass. There were, to Matthew's mind, surprisingly few men; he counted eighteen. But, to judge from the satisfaction on Omo's face, they were equal to the task deputed to them. When the king's short, monosyllabic address was at an end, they lifted their spears in unison with a sharp cry, wheeled about, and made towards the forest at a noiseless trot. Something to Matthew's surprise, Omo, without acknowledging him, went back into the hut, and a servant hung the leopard-skin curtain across the entrance.

Ongwe, who had been in close conversation with the head man, came running to tell him what it was all about. It was one of the famous Omo raiding expeditions, which kept the surrounding villages on tenterhooks, and whose primary object was, of course, the capture of slaves. Matthew understood at once; Omo had had enough of friendly preliminaries and wanted to get down to business. He was cunningly determined to force a deal before the departure of his guest, and would, no doubt, exert his utmost guile to gain advantage through the exploitation of the blood-brotherhood.

It was the moment for which he had been waiting. He had kept in reserve two or three of the most important of the gifts—among them the head and foot of an immense carven and gilded French bedstead, which Abiathar had picked up for a song in one of the junk shops, and which had been loaded among the rest of the trading materials—Abiathar insisting, when Matthew scoffed, that nothing was too fantastic to rouse negro cupidity—a fact which Matthew had proved to be true. In the course of the morning, he solemnly despatched the thing of cupids, garlands and true lovers' knots to the king's hut, with the request for a palaver, which the mystified messengers, returning,

said that Omo was pleased to grant. "Omo plenty pleased with dash," Ongwe informed him, after some talk with the messengers.

Chuckling over Omo's inevitable mystification, and wondering to what use native ingenuity would, by the time he arrived there, have put the pieces, Matthew made, for once, a formal toilet. The next hour or two would either justify or damn his trip up-country; his credit as a trader depended on it.

He made as much a ceremony of his visit as he had done of the first one: walking at the tail end of a procession of his coast boys, with an umbrella carried over his head—the sign of a formal palaver. Omo was waiting, in his robes and crown.

CHAPTER VIII

I

THE *Cassiopæia* came back, partly slaved, to find the roadstead crowded with shipping. Among the ships Abiathar recognized several Bristol vessels whose masters were friends of his, and two formerly owned by Flood, Peddy and Shergill; but his mind was too exercised by Matthew to pay attention to these. He made all haste ashore; the beach was bustling with trade. Either Matthew's mission had succeeded, or the captains were paying Omo's prices for the sake of filling their holds.

"Where's my passenger?" asked Abiathar, almost before the formalities of greeting were over. The Governor gave him a straight look.

"I'm glad to see you back, captain. Without any personal offence—I'll be glad to see you gone."

"Did he pull it off?"

Pleydell shrugged his shoulders, and jerked his thumb towards the hubbub on the beach.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Can we get off in a fortnight?"

"I doubt it. You see what's in—and we're short of labour. The factories are glutted; we had to send your reserve lot down to Endor; Doran's looking after 'em."

"You might as well say Old Nick! Why the devil did you have to move them?" scowled Abiathar, mentally computing the added expense and inconvenience of fetching slaves from Endor.

"For the last week they've been pouring down: ten per cent prime nigger, perhaps thirty per cent saleable, the rest"—Pleydell pulled a face; there was no need to say what happened to unsaleable goods. "Omo's seen the chance of a quick turn-over and scoured the country. They're shipping cattle that aren't fit for anything but the slaughterhouse, poor devils. Your captains are hugging themselves, and the rest are swearing and taking the left-overs—there'll be trouble about this later, you'll see, Captain Crown."

"So he's got the Omo concession." Matthew might have shown the courtesy of coming down to welcome his captain.

"So it appears."

"Appears? Damnation, where's Flood? Why ain't he here to answer for himself?"

"Come up to my place," said the Governor, and flung orders to a couple of waiting natives.

"Flood's still up at Omo," he said, when they were alone. "And the longer he stays there, the better it suits me. Take my tip, Crown; don't fetch owners out here again, if you can help it. The climate don't agree with them." He checked Abiathar's explosion with an uplifted finger.

"I've got no desire to be pushed to the point of arresting him, nor Jimmy Montcalm. If it came to that, it'd have to be Flood, for Jimmy's more valuable, locally, than our fine gentleman! What's one to do? It's all over the

place he's after that black wench of Montcalm's—and I'm damned if I'll see Jimmy hang for murder at the end of his days!"

"It might be t'other way round," mumbled Abiathar.

Pleydell shrugged again.

"To put it plainly, I look on that as Flood's affair. If he chooses to swing for a nigger——! They had trouble before he left, and the tale's come down the river that the canoe was ambushed on the way. It may be Jimmy's business, or it may not; I don't want to know. I don't want to be forced into action against Jimmy. Maybe it sounds like shifting responsibility, but there's a lot goes on here that doesn't respond to conventional handling. I reckon washing his hands is part of a Governor's work. But I'll be mightily pleased when you get your protégé aboard."

"How the hell do I get him aboard, when he's at Omo?"

"Don't you worry; he'll be down, all in good time—and Omo with him. He's talked Omo into paying us a state call, and we're to have the pleasure of turning ourselves inside out to receive His Majesty—guard of honour, salute from the fort, and all the rest of it!" He jerked his head towards the window, which overlooked the scurrying beach. "They're bursting themselves to get away before the fireworks—which 'ull mean every one roarin' drunk and total paralysis of trade. I hope you've got plenty of liquor left; we're running short, after all this company."

"I ain't got so much; they did pretty well out of us at Bonny, and anyhow, we paid our dashes, last time in."

"You'd better cast your eye over that."

He found and passed to Abiathar a sheet of paper, on which, in Matthew's writing, were set forth the terms of concession, giving Flood traders first call in perpetuity on Omo goods, revoking the preposterous duties and reducing the head tax to its formerly agreed proportions—in consideration of which the king of Omo and his emissaries were to receive full royal recognition from all English traders calling at Fort Charles, and the privilege, if need arose, of claiming the support of the fort in times of tribal warfare. Large "presents," in the form of arms, ammunition, wearing apparel and household goods were demanded, in ratification of this interesting document, "to all of which," Matthew was pleased to write, "I have pledged my word."

"A word which wasn't his to pledge," pointed out Pleydell. "I'd like to hear the Company if our military was called out to help Omo blow up one of his neighbour's villages!"

"He ain't done so badly," grunted Abiathar, when he had mastered the document. As Pleydell was silent, he looked up shrewdly. "Flood ain't no favourite with you; isn't that so?"

"As far as favouritism goes," came the slow answer, "I like him no better and no worse than the rest of his kind. Romantics; I mistrust 'em. Ay, that's the name for your young Master Flood. He sees life through the eyes of a lad in his teens: as a fine, gilded playground. He's prepared to sacrifice everything and everybody so long as he gets his own way. It ain't an adult outlook, and it bodes ill to a lot o' folk too innocent to look after their own interests."

"Among which I hope you ain't countin' me? You've seen the worst of him," said Abiathar staunchly. "The lad's been through hard times, and he ain't had time, as yet, to digest his fortune."

"Best or worse—there's neither pity nor simplicity in his nature. Ay, I'll grant you those are qualities that come with age; but age 'ull teach that one nothing. The core o' vanity in his interior's too hard to be affected by that which 'ud soften most folk and teach 'em commiseration of their fellow men. God help any one that's dependent on Matthew Flood; for Lucifer himself is not prouder, or more evilly determined to get his own way, whoever may suffer for it." He paused. "Pilgrim's dead."

"You don't lay that at Flood's door!" but he allowed his consternation to be seen. "How'd he die?" Death, after all, was so common an affair that one did not waste phrases upon it.

"I don't know; I've only seen the niggers—and Owner Flood doesn't think it worthy of mention in his letter. Pilgrim was the best fellow round here, by a long way—and Christie Doran'll have something to say about it." Pleydell poured himself out a long drink and emptied it at a gulp. "Well, they say Africa resents whites; you'd think it 'ud have worn out its resentment by now. Up there"—he pointed up the hill to the "hogyard"—"we've left our hecatomb: seven hundred in twenty years. Not enough, maybe, for Africa, that holds life cheap."

II

The palms held the sun off the landing place, where waited, fretful and sweating, the British representatives: cursing the heat, the flies, their tight uniforms, Omo and Owner Flood, all in one breath: which did not prevent their cheering heartily when the royal canoes came in sight. A solemn body-guard of militia backed the picture, and held back the seething populace, which edged and thrust and milled for advantage as the fleet approached. As a reception, Omo had nothing to complain of. There was one—to the Britishers—conspicuous absentee: Jimmy Montcalm. His representatives, in hastily laundered cottons, reported he was too sick to appear.

There was an awkward moment when cries of "Three cheers for Owner Flood!" quite drowned the cries of "Omo!" but fortunately the king took all demonstrations to himself, and gave regal acknowledgment as he climbed out of the canoe.

The figure that followed him might, by those who knew him well, have been recognized as Matthew Flood: gaunt, yellow as a guinea—with only those unmistakable Flood traits, the short, arrogant nose and the black bar of brows remaining of that careless handsomeness the jungle had stolen; the hair of his head hung on his shoulders and a great bush of black beard covered the lower parts of his face. He was smiling, but there was a strange, blank look behind his dark gaze, the crease between his brows that of a man who comes slowly to consciousness out of a curious dream. He looked at the people on the landing place—Abiathar, as well as Pleydell, noticed it—as though he did not believe they were there; their existence offended some part of his intelligence; he rejected them.

But the look passed. He burst into a loud laugh as Abiathar clapped him on the shoulder; while the captains and Pleydell were paying their proper deferences to Omo, his hands were seized and shaken by all who could get

near enough to give active expression to their welcome. One look he gave around—and every onlooker knew whom he sought. Then he seemed to give himself up to the uproarious greeting the fort had prepared for a popular hero. There were only a few who afterwards recollected that Flood hadn't seemed to be "all there": that his mind seemed to be away, dwelling on other things. It was also considered odd—later—that he refused to say a word on the subject of Pilgrim's death; but such lugubrious topics were easily swept into the background by the start of the revelry.

In fact, a great many things were remembered—or said to be remembered—later; the truism about being wise after the event exemplified itself with extraordinary richness after the sailing of the *Cassiopeia*, and the grim incidents that surrounded her departure.

The formal reception was to take place at night: meanwhile there were the king's hunger, the king's thirst, his insatiable curiosity to be ministered to. He signified his desire to visit the ships that lay in the harbour—there were not more than half a dozen, the rest having prudently upped-anchor and fled before the imminence of the royal visit.

"Ain't it enough to deal with him ashore, without having that god-damned, greedy nigger traipsing over our property?" grumbled Abiathar, when informed the *Cassiopeia* was to be the first victim of the royal patronage.

"When do we leave?"

"That's your look out; but for this set-to the goods 'ud have been shipped the day after to-morrow. We don't look like making much headway till the school treat's over," sneered Abiathar.

"We must be away in a week."

"That don't seem unreasonable," he grunted, wondering if Matthew were scared of Montcalm, but, on second thoughts, rejecting an explanation too simple and too foreign to Matthew's character to be relied upon. He looked doubtfully at his companion, and once more it struck him that the look in Matthew's eyes was of one not completely "all there." It was the look of one so eaten up inwardly with a single idea that he was out of touch with all that went on around him. He remembered that the jungle was said to play odd tricks with people's wits, and his suspicious watchfulness followed Matthew for the rest of the time they were together; but there was nothing abnormal in his conduct.

By nightfall the place was in a state of orgy; it was millennium for Black Jack-anna. Of all the black and white community, there was not a man, woman or child who was not drunk—on palm wine, if they could afford no better. Flares lit the beach from end to end; strings of bunting, contributed from the ships, darkened and sagged in the evening dew. Under the attack of spatulate thumbs, banjos achieved inconceivable crescendos, and the roll of drums, vibrating in the chests and bellies of listeners, evoked all of the most primitive there is in man.

As the night wore on, and liberty established itself with more and more certainty among the company, it was as though Africa herself, restless beyond the boundary imposed by civilization, slyly advanced her great, soft paw of a black cat and regained possession of her own. Crazy with drink, the British sailors started to couple openly with black girls in the still-warm sands; the innocent licentiousness of the up-country native met the sophisticated evil of

the coast with an effect of combustion that sent its black smoke swinging up to the unsteady stars. Officers and men on duty in the partly slaved vessels looked enviously towards the glare and cursed the fate that kept them away from the fun; but, as things turned out, there were few who had not opportunity, before the celebrations were over, to share them.

Not a few lived to recall those nights as glimpses of inferno; they were even responsible—at a much later date—for one or two conversions; they entered startlingly into death-bed confessions. Men kept them as a disgraceful secret from their sweethearts and bragged about them among their companions—who did not hesitate to brand them as liars.

The orgy lasted four days—during which Jimmy Montcalm was never seen outside his factory walls. There were all sorts of tales about Jimmy—to which unlimited alcohol added a fillip. One was that he had killed his black girl and slept with the corpse. The factory hands swore the girl was still living, but “Jimmy’d taken it out of her.” By day she was chained in the back yard, and by night she slept in a kennel that once had housed the factory watchdog. Jimmy had gone as mad as a hatter; it was only a matter of time before they locked him up.

On the second night of the orgy Abiathar retired to the ship, not on the grounds of morality, but because he was not trusting his Fantees—not to mention the very good lot he had picked up at Bonny—to a grumbling and envious guard. Before leaving, he prevailed on the Governor, not without difficulty, to give Matthew lodging for the remainder of the time they were in port, so that he might be spared the disagreeable and enervating business of sleeping on a slave ship—the slaves being always very restless and noisy when in harbour. Pleydell cursed him heartily; he had enough to do, without keeping an eye on Matthew.

Abiathar pointed out that as Montcalm had apparently fortified himself in his house, and never set foot outside, there was no particular need for watchfulness.

“Captain Crown, I don’t trust your owner an inch, and it’s not him I’m thinking of, but Jimmy.”

“Jimmy was all right, when I saw him; swore a bit at Flood, and you could see he was itching to get him in the ribs, but most of our talk was business.”

“Ay; they’re as much to be trusted, the both of ’em, as a pair of jaguars,” growled Pleydell; and had the factory watched. At the end of four days Jimmy had not been even as far as the barracoons; he was either very sick, or playing ’possum.

So Matthew slept once more—if he slept?—at the residence. Just when the orgy showed signs of perishing for lack of liquor, another ship came in and entered with zest into the celebrations. On the third night, Father Cleery, faced with the destruction of the little good he had ever succeeded in doing, committed suicide. On the fourth morning, Pleydell, purple and puffy about the eyes, managed, by dint of threats, objurgations and, in one or two cases, physical compulsion, to convene a council for the termination of the over-prolonged revelry. Its members sat collected, their sly sidelong glances betraying their curiosity as to how much of their individual contributions to the carousal had escaped the Governor’s attention.

III

In a corner of Black Jack-anna's a young soldier sat snivelling; partly because he had arrived at that stage of drunkenness, partly because he had come to the end of his pay, and partly because the last stage of a drinking bout was, for him, an overwhelming condition of sentimentality: in which were mixed up the town in which he was born, his grandmother's cottage with a garden bunched with herbs and joyful, vulgar posies, like the joyful, vulgar girls who loitered in the lanes, his first job as garden boy and the little kitchen wench whose kisses smelt richly of the pots she scoured, the May-day feasts where he once won a saddle of mutton for swarming the greasy pole—none of which had prevented his taking the King's shilling and finding himself attached to one of the regiments that garrisoned the Royal African Company's forts.

"I'd 'a sooner hanged meself—I'd a deaal sooner 'a hanged meself!" was the burthen of his misery. "I'd 'a done it—sure I wud! if I'd 'a knowed!"

Among those who good-humouredly cursed him were many who shared his sentiments; but what was the good of snivelling? If you found yourself on the Gold Coast, you made the best of what the Gold Coast offered you; you cursed it, and hated it, but gradually you learned the tricks it taught you. You were often sick, but there were days when you were better. From hating, you passed to bearing, from bearing—not to liking it, but to a queer, numb state in which anything was better than striving against your fate. At the end of three years they offered you your passage home, but there were many who did not trouble to take it. The prospect of rousing themselves from their coma was too painful. Still, most people admitted the first year was bad. It was the worst. Young Ben Harwood, seven months out from England, found it unadulterated hell.

His round, blubbered face, still, for all the tropic sun, the plum-red face of a country boy, his trembling lips and tearful, bloodshot eyes caught Matthew's attention as he swung from the counter where he and others were chaffing Black Jack-anna—a dangerous game, as any one out of his cups would have remembered; but who bothered about danger in those days?

One did not see many faces like that on the Gold Coast. That look of sullen and fallen innocence, in its setting of vice, amounted to an outrage. One saw it on the faces of schoolboys who were the butt of their companions—a look of animal fear, of desperation that breaks out sooner or later in some damaging folly—damaging to its agent, rather than to those against whom it is directed.

"What the devil's the matter with you?" Matthew was good-naturedly contemptuous.

The boy lurched to his feet and managed a salute. His uniform was disgraceful—spattered with grease, the stuff of the coat looped to the button-holes with string, a gaping rent under his armpit. He stammered pitifully, too taken aback to be coherent, before this towering, black-bearded superior, who glared down on him, with hands planted on his broad hips.

"A fine spectacle you are, for a soldier in His Majesty's army!"

Young Harwood gulped and pushed his sleeve across his eyes. A hand on

his shoulder thrust him outside, out into the chilly evening air; thrust him up against the wall, where he was promptly and wretchedly sick.

"You'd better get back to the fort," said Matthew, not unkindly. "It's the best place for you."

The boy gave a scared look round; he had recognized his companion, and madness and despair prompted his gasped utterance.

"For God's sake, sir—help me out of this place!"

After a pause—

"Do you mean—to desert?" asked Matthew sharply.

The boy made a sound that might have been a sob, hiccup or laugh.

"I don't care what they call it. Get away—that's all I want——"

"When did you come out?"

"At the start o' the year. I got more'n two years to go. I can't stand it!"

"Better men than you have stood it, and come well out of it." He tried if rallying would revive the manhood in this pitiful male animal.

"I 'an't got a sojer's heart, sir! By rights I'm a garden boy——"

"But you thought the army'd pay better; was that it? Why don't you face up to it—if you've got no one to buy you out of the army?"

"It worn't that way, sir. Sir, I won't tell you no lies; 'twor a choice between sojering and the lock-up."

"What had you done?"

"... Burning hayricks. There was other chaps as well, but 'twor me that got caught. 'Tworn't no business o' mine neither; farmer'd done nought to me. Danged if I know why I ever wor such a zany to join in; 'twor just a bit o' fun, like——"

"You know if you go back to England, or to any English colony, you'll be shot for desertion?"

"I'd sooner. I'd sooner be a slave on one o' they plantations——"

"You're drunk." But there was something beside contempt in the hard voice. "You blubbering young fool! I could get you a flogging for this."

"I—I 'an't done no harm!"

"What's your name?"

"Ben Harwood, of Slaughter, in the shires."

"Well, Ben Harwood, you've got damned little chance of seeing your shires again unless you learn to keep your mouth shut. Now be off, and get that liquor out of your brain; and if you're of the same mind when you're sober, see me again."

"Sir—sir——!"

"Hold your tongue. And if you've got any comrades who think as you do, give them the same warning. Do you understand? I want four." His fingers bit like strips of steel into the shivering shoulder of the boy. "Four men that 'ud sooner be shot or be slaves than stay in Fort Charles. Find them, and I'll see what can be done for you."

As he walked through the town—deserted, because all who were not in Black Jack-anna's were collected along the beach or round the "royal" quarters—the tip of his cigar a red circle in the darkness, he thought how often in the past fate had placed in his hand the winning card. It had not always been so, of course, but, taking things by and large, luck had in no small degree governed his life. Just when his affairs seemed to be racing on to ruin would

come the miraculous intervention, followed, often, by a period of favour that lasted long enough to restore one's confidence in the general view, that Flood was a lucky devil who would inevitably come out on top of any awkward situation that the fates—or his own actions—invented for him.

Once again the trick had played itself—in the shape of a snivelling little soldier, who might, or might not, retain sufficient resolution, when sober, to forward the plan which he had brought back to Fort Charles. It was surely a sign that he was meant to succeed, that he had not had to go seeking and bribing—always a risky business in a community that depends on chatter for its entertainment. The tool had come and placed itself in his hands. To the superstitious mind of the gambler there could have been no better omen.

Later, he was not to feel so confident. The bunch of scallywags who, under pretext of hunting for the seabirds' eggs that made a welcome variation in regimental diet, mustered up the creek, were not the kind, on sight, to inspire confidence.

There was Harwood, and there was a man of twice his age, with a patch over one eye and shabby civilian clothes. There were two others, in uniform—or what passed for such: a couple of pock-marked ex-jailbirds, one of whom Matthew knew by sight as having been up before the Governor on the charge of an offence against one of the native girls. One thing they all four had in common: the look of eager and hungry desperation, mingled with incredulity, that they turned on him, as he walked slowly towards them. The soldiers saluted, the other pulled his hat. Young Harwood muttered their names: Johnson, the civilian. The taller of the soldiers, Sawkins. The shorter, Fogge.

"So you're the would-be deserters."

The man called Johnson nodded. The others seemed too scared to give themselves away. They wanted to believe, yet dared not. They waited, mum, while Matthew scrutinized each one, trying to evaluate the probable courage, the probable daring there might be in each man, when the cloud of mistrust was lifted from his soul.

"Your payment depends on the success of our undertaking. You get nothing for trying. You understand that?"

"We don't know what we got to try yet," mumbled one. "And as for payment—we only got young Ben's word——"

"I'll give you mine. Ten British guineas apiece and free conduct to Barbados; after which you must shift for yourselves."

A noise like a groan came from Sawkins; as though afraid of having betrayed himself, he clapped his hand over his mouth, but Matthew, looking quickly into the red-rimmed eyes that glared at him across a barricade of dirty fingers, thought: "That one's all right; he'll commit murder to get away." The other soldier and Johnson "played canny," spat and looked elsewhere. It was, perhaps, that, being older, they were more sceptical, less able to believe that Owner Flood should concern himself with their futures—even to serve his own ends. At last, the civilian, with a sulphurous oath, declared that, as he had nothing to lose either way, he'd take the chance—whatever that meant. The others mumbled their agreement. Fogge asked flatly "what the game was?"

"Not so fast." Folding his arms, Matthew leaned against the trunk of one

of the starved-looking palms, whose absurd umbrella of foliage was at such a height that it afforded no shade. He surveyed with a grimace his scarecrow supporters. "Why should I trust you?" asked the grandson of Hercules Flood.

All four were obviously taken aback by the unexpected challenge. They started to shuffle, grin and look sheepishly at each other. Johnson was the first to rise to the occasion.

"Hell's bells! Ain't it enough we're here?" he retorted. "There ain't no need to tell you what it means to these chaps, if we're caught."

Taking courage from the forthrightness of the older man:

"Whatever it is, I'm game," said young Harwood; his boyish face had hardened with resolution. "I'm game, sir." Something cowed and stupid had gone out of him, there was no doubt he realized and accepted the seriousness of his pledge.

The man who had clapped his hand to his mouth stood forward suddenly, jerking off his coat.

"You want to know why you should trust me? Take a look at that!" Wheeling round, he presented a back marked by the cat o' nine tails; some of the stripes had not yet healed. "Is that good enough? Twenty for me, ten for my mate here; and why? Because we complained o' the rations, that was worse than they give the pigs. You don't ask a man if you can trust him—after seeing that?"

"And supposing, through mischance, you should let yourself in for another flogging? I could do nothing for you. Supposing, while you were carrying out the task I have for you, you were caught——?"

Sawkins's mouth stretched into the travesty of a smile as he shook his head.

"They'll never catch me again, Mr. Flood. These'll prevent it"—he held out a pair of hands that sent a curious sensation through Matthew; they were less like hands than deformed and vicious animals. With them he performed a quick gesture, that explained itself. Matthew looked quickly away.

"And you?" He turned to the man who had not yet spoken.

"You heard what my mate said," muttered Fogge sullenly. "We're in the same boat."

Matthew told them what he wanted.

Narrowly as he watched them, sharply as he noted the glances that passed between them, he could detect no signs of reluctance. And he had asked them no light thing. . . .

When they had taken it in, they discussed it laconically. Matthew, observing them, got the character of each man. Fogge was stupid, but willing. Young Ben, shivering with nerves, was nevertheless ready to do or dare anything for the man he looked on as his saviour. Johnson was cynically prepared to back up his companions. The dynamic figure of the party was Sawkins. It was he who, at the end of half an hour, came out with a proposal so naively and unblushingly villainous that Matthew's blood for a moment ran cold; then, seeing that the others took it for granted, he despised himself for his involuntary qualms.

"That's the only way. It ain't no use, trying to break into Jimmy's. The fort's no less solid, when it comes to a raid."

"And the blacks? They have to come into it."

Sawkins laid a finger to the side of his nose.

"Don't you make any mistake on that, Mr. Flood, sir. There ain't a nigger on the place wouldn't do Jimmy in, if he'd got the chance and the brains. What about Isogo's brother—you know, the chap Jimmy cut up for liking his wench? 'Mbwole was fond of his brother, that was his twin, and the pair of 'em have got plenty friends. . . ."

Were they to be trusted?

The plot seemed to him so loosely hung together, so dependent on "if" and "providing," it was a miracle if it succeeded. It did not escape Matthew's notice that two at least of the plotters—Sawkins and Harwood—did not envisage failure. They were the two most desperate, and Sawkins was capable of carrying the others along on the tide of his enthusiasm. A signal was agreed upon; it was thought better by all that Matthew, a conspicuous figure in the colony, should not take the risk of being seen again in their company.

Omo, well satisfied, had departed in state, leaving behind him a crop of yellow eyeballs, of blotchy complexions and the profound relief of all responsible parties. Abiathar, puffy round the eyes, his nose the colour of a ripe plum, swore he hadn't a hand on board fit to lift a fish-hook; he dosed the lot; and was obliged to wait for the doses to take effect. Shore labour was unobtainable: the native workers too glassy-eyed, too lax, too indifferent, even under the threat of flogging, to do more than sleep off their four-day debauch. Not a girl at Black Jack-anna's would stir from her mat. The fort itself might have succumbed to the plague.

But life gradually picked up its normal tempo and the canoes started once more to ply between the shore and the ships. A new batch of slaves brought Jimmy Montcalm out of his hole—but not out of his barracoons.

The time had come for the *Cassiopeia* to sail.

IV

She was a devil-ship that night. While they were in harbour it was impossible to allow the slaves the freedom of the decks, and down in the stifling holds—whose necessarily open hatches were guarded by armed sentries—were wretches who had already spent the most of a month within the sweltering wooden shell. The reek that came up through the hatches from time to time overwhelmed the guards themselves, but worse than the reek—which was barely perceptible in the captain's quarters—was the continual, hollow howling, the noise, half-human, half-bestial, of creatures who had bidden farewell to hope. It was a noise that tore at the nerves of one unaccustomed. Matthew, drinking himself into deafness in his cabin, watched the time and wondered if he had offered enough. Gold was powerful; was it infallible? And it was not a matter of gold alone. . . .

The moon laid a broad, silver track across the roadstead. Once more it had arrived at full, and its flat, white face presented an immortal indifference to those sounds which the night breeze wafted even to the fort. An unforgettable beauty lay upon the scene, a silken perfection of sapphire and silver, to which the ships, their every rope and crossbar picked out by moonlight, contributed.

There was not a sound from the beach, and there were no lights, except in the Governor's house, where Pleydell, no doubt, was closing his ears with the sweet cadences of his classics. Heaven and hell mingled in the moonlit sparkle of the water.

Abiathar had been his rounds and turned in, for he had to take the ship across the bar at four in the morning.

. . . It came at last: the sound for which he had been waiting. A shout from the watch, followed by the quick patter of feet along the decks. Excited by the babel of voices, the howls of the slaves turned to shrieks of terror: anything new, anything unexpected, according to their unhappy experience, boded ill to themselves. There were threatening shouts from the sentries. The door of Matthew's cabin burst open; it was Abiathar, red and tousled from sleep.

"There's a fire ashore; looks like it was Jimmy's place."

He stopped. Matthew, who had not moved, was looking at him. Their eyes met; incredulity, followed by understanding that was partly horror, flashed into Abiathar's. He opened his lips to speak, closed them, as though he had changed his mind, and went hurriedly out on deck. Matthew rose slowly and stood at the door of his cabin.

The palm trees were like sweeps' brooms against a smoky crimson background, which was animated from time to time by the leaping flames. People were rushing like ants towards the conflagration, their smallest gestures visible in the clear, sanguinary light. Excitement, confusion. The more confusion the better. The nails drove into the palms of his hands, but he forced himself to be calm. The smoke was whirled pale grey against the dark blue sky. The breeze was in the direction of the settlement, which scattered many, anxious about their own dwellings. Sparks and bits of burning thatch were blown townwards—but had to pass the barracoons, before reaching the first of the houses.

Matthew found himself walking deliberately round to the bows. He heard cries behind him; heard someone give it as his opinion that the fire had caught the barracoons. These things meant nothing, because all his attention was focused on the water. He stood looking across the dark water, outside the track of the moonlight. Once he thought he caught a flash, but it was a dolphin, cutting its silver arc in a trough of the blackened waves. He strained his ears, but the clamour of the slaves and the shouts of the sailors defeated him; he could only hear his heart pounding, with great, slow beats, at the wall of his chest . . . until, at last, he was sure of the soft, quick sound of paddles. He waited to make certain, then he turned sharply and sought Abiathar.

"Tell them to be ready; we have boarders."

Abiathar faced him. In that moment, one would have said he had fear of his companion. But no earthly fear; rather the fear of one who comes face to face with the powers of darkness.

"So it was you . . . !"

"Well?"

Abiathar looked him up and down and turned on his heel. Transported with anger, Matthew caught his elbow.

"You heard what I said?"

Abiathar shook off the hand and walked away. At a few paces' distance, he turned.

"You're the owner, Mr. Flood," he said, not troubling to keep the scorn out of his voice. He beckoned to the boatswain and gave the necessary order.

They had difficulty in carrying on deck the bundle that was dragged out of the bottom of the boat: the thrashing, protesting something covered in singed sackcloth, that was taken, at Matthew's nod, to his cabin. The beat of his heart changed to a rapid, suffocating tick. The canoe boys were clamouring round him; he looked towards Sawkins, who, with his three companions, stood there—young Harwood and Fodge shivering visibly, Johnson watchful, suspicious, on his guard, as though, even at this hour, suspecting a trick.

"What did you promise them?"

Sawkins told him. Matthew saw that his face and hands were blackened, his garments burnt in places. Sawkins, at least, had earned his liberation. Matthew paid the canoe boys, who were over the side and away in a flash. He found Abiathar at his elbow, with a face like stone; he did not speak, only looked from Matthew to the four Englishmen.

"Four more hands for you, Captain Crown. If things fall out as they did on our way here, I dare say you'll find use for them."

"Are you mad? Do you want to have the law on us, for harbouring deserters?"

"Either we harbour them, or the sharks will," said Matthew carelessly. "Get forward, men. You know you'll have to work your passage—so you'd better take your chance of sleep while we're here!"

"As sure as there is a God in heaven," Abiathar was saying, "this is the last ship I sail for you, Mr. Flood!"

. . . In the cabin the bundle lay inert on the carpet, and his hands shook as he cut the rope that loosely held it together. Immediately there was a convulsion; a leap, and a double row of sharp teeth sank into his wrist. Laughing excitedly at the spots of blood, Matthew sprang back—fortunately to the door—for her first leap took her straight to it. Defeated, mad with alarm, she sprang for the open port, and he clutched the dark, shining hips, only just in time. It was like struggling with an eel; again and again he had all but lost her, having but one hand—with the other he jammed the port into its frame—to control that sinuous length of muscle and sinew, which at last, with a supreme exertion of physical strength—for she was as strong and cunning as a leopard—he succeeded in flinging across the bed. Raging and thrashing her limbs, threatening him with teeth and claws, there was nothing for it but to bind her, with a rope made of the twisted coverlet; a silken mummy lay at last across the mattress, its eyes rolling with frenzy, its teeth grinding with rage and terror.

Even in that moment of almost insane excitement, he had time to mark how, with her presence, all that had hitherto seemed outlandish in the surroundings slipped into place: those too-luscious draperies, the Turkish rugs, gilt-framed mirrors and bolsters covered in tapestry, that, as though ashamed of their presence in the cabin of a slave ship, had seemed during the past months to depreciate in value, the very materials of which they were made

to become shabby and threadbare, recovered the fullness of their texture and colours.

He poured himself out another glass of brandy, and emptied it, standing over her, to gloat upon his incredible prize. Then, as she still raged, and the storm showed no signs of abating, he laughed, and, rolling his silken mummy to the farther side of the bed, flung himself down, to sleep, for the first time, by Sheba's side.

CHAPTER IX

I

FOR those whose sensibilities are not harrowed by reading of horrors, the old slaving records of the Middle Passage might conveniently fill the hiatus that necessarily fall in this portion of our narrative. All we need know of the voyage of the *Cassiopæia*—her last but one, and of that we shall learn later—may be gleaned from a few sea-stained and all but illegible pages, roughly stitched into a little brown cover, which are cherished by a humble Bristol family whose pride lies in its seafaring tradition. These constitute the remains—or perhaps the whole—of a diary kept by one J. R. Bowling, seaman, on whose verbal testimony rests all that is known of the *Cassiopæia* and her burden of living souls, that vanished off the Barbary coast in the year 1763, some twelve months after the events we are considering. J. R. Bowling is supposed, after a train of events so extraordinary as to be miraculous, to have found his way back to Bristol in or about the years 1768 or '69; since which the legend of his adventures has become so embroidered and overladen with the rich inventions of each successive narrator that one holds no brief, save for the bare facts.

Thus, however, runs the diary, shorn of matter which, having no bearing upon our history, its editors have extracted.

“Novbr 3rd 1762. Yesterday we left Fort Charles on the Gold Coast which ill deserves so fine a Name being more full of Pittyfull & derelect human beings than any place I have vissited. We have cargo of 307 slaves some from Bonny some from Wida but the most part & the best from Ft Charles were our Owner has concluded a bargain with the native King that seems to afford satisfaction to every body except it is to be suposed the poor creatures it consarns. The ship is sound & healthy thanks to the captn who is a man of gt experience in Shipping slaves. Any neglectfulness in the treatment of the negros is severly punisht.

“Nov. 13th. There are 2 cases of pox among the negros.

“Nov. 14th. Two men were flogged this mornng havg been captured in the act of trying to gain axess to the female qtrs. 41 cases of pox & several of disentery.

“Nov. 16th. 100 cases of pox & 40 including 2 of the overseers & Mr Foxon the bosun down with disentery. This morning *the black woman* was seen on the after deck.” (The remainder of this entry is illegible, having been blacked out, probably as a measure of prudence.)

“Nov. 17th. Some of the hands got up an argument on the matter of Female slaves. It is resented that the men shd be deprived of the satisfaction in wch there superiors indulge in open fashion & even to the prejudice of the ship's business.” (? This would suggest that the prohibitions forced on the crew were not extended to the ship's officers. Among the privileges extended to the officers of slave traders was that of carrying one or more negroes, either for trade or personal service.)

"Nov. 20th. There is gt increase in disentery among the ships Company & it is next to impossible for those who are healthy to execute all the duties required of them. This adds to the ill-feeling among the crew not a little of wch is directed towards the Owner whose exactions of service are outside of all Reason nor does he care for the well being of anny person except of his black mistress who is Queen & whose evry wish must be fulfilled wch is contrary to any fashion known of treating the blacks who need to be kept in strict control other wise there is no dealing with them so impudent they become & so it appears in this Case. One negro woman died this morning & was fed to the sharks the first tit bit these monsters have had so far tho they have followed the ship from Ft Charles & there was much fighting wch all watched with interest.

"Nov. 29th. This being my first voyage upon a slave ship shall be God's grace be my last if the Almighty sees fit to render me back whole from these adventures. A negro broke loose today & assaulted one of the Centries with a chopper. The man's head was cloven nearly to the neck. Sentence of death was past on the Negro who at sundown was hung from the yard arm & his body later cut down & beheaded on the deck the whole performance being witnessed by the Owner & his mistress with as much nonchalance as tho it were a scene at the play. I did not know wch to think the more inhuman him or she, for it is surely a vile thing to see one of one's own people treated in this fashion & the indifference of her to th pittyfull spectacle was enough to freeze one's Blood.

"Nov 30th. We have accomlisht half our voyage or thereabouts & the Prospect ahead makes one wonder" (illegible). "The Flux has now got me & the rest in my berth.

"Dec. 12th. It is a matter for marvell how human beings having the same blood and bowels as there fellow men & sharing the same instincts & passions can carouse & make merry regaling themselves with evry luxury money can buy within arms length of others for whom existence is living hell. A part of the deck has now been resarved (there was little enough to spare) for our Owner & his doxy & there the pair of them bask & play in full view of all. And there must be persons passing in & out with trays of Refreshment & fruits our men wd give there souls to set their teeth into & men at hand to alter the shades or relay the mats when there Position ceases to please. This on a ship that is rotten with disease, its men like crawling ghosts & its cargo dwindling from day to Day as the enforced confinement saps the energy that can only be conserved by healthy exercise in fresh air. There are now so few in fit condition to take charge of the negros that they can only be exercised in small lots, & each lot at intervals of 3 or 4 days.

"Dec. 14th. Matters go from bad to worse. Some say the ship is curst & others that there is a devil aboard. The Owners cannot make much on this trip since we are carrying nothing but slaves & a few cwt of Ivory. Each man swears nothing will make him sign on for the return passage.

"Dec. 25th. Christmas Day. God save us all.

"December 28th. Of our 307 slaves we have lost 50 with the Flux wch Lord who has done the Middle Passage ten times says is not a bad proportion. There was also the fellow who was hung & 2 who threw themselves overboard when we were barely out of sight of land. That leaves us only 215 for trading

women & children bringing the losses up to 92 & they will have to fetch good prices to make this trip worth while. You might think this wd occasion qualms to the Owner but he is so infatuated with his black mistress I verily believe he hardly gives the matter a thought. Such is not the case with the capt'n who is in villainous humour for wch we seem likely to pay with our lives.

"Jan. 5th. 1763. Today we sighted the first of the Islands but it will yet be many days before those of us who are living reach our destination. . . ."

A few irrelevant scrawls conclude this journal of a brave and honest seaman on whose word rested, as things turned out, events whose effects governed the lives of three generations.

II

It requires no particular effort of imagination to conjure the circumstances of that voyage to Cytherea, whose sinister setting no doubt contributed to the madness of the two protagonists: the *Cassiopæia* wallowing under the crush of her canvas into the trough of the waves, creaking and rolling and rocking under her spreading shrouds, while in her malachite track followed the tireless sharks; breaking into blisters under the tropical sun, each day a little less seaworthy, her timbers yawning a little more, to let in the red-hot shafts that made a furnace of her between-decks. Each day diminishment of the fresh-water supply, of the primitive store of medicaments, of men's physical strength, of their small reserve of moral courage. One can picture, perhaps too clearly, Abaddon below, and above, in a setting of bizarre luxury—itself an outrage on its surroundings—a Nirvana dedicated to lovers' transports, ruled by the sable Venus whose spells enchained her lover more surely day by day.

They were to speak of her as "the black witch;" to attempt—happily for her, too late—to fix the charge of sorcery upon her; but she had her defenders, and although the testimony of these was not disinterested, they triumphed in the end. And indeed, there can hardly have been a more innocent sorceress. The charge of witchcraft has been preferred, from time immemorial, against those who have the *naïveté* or the courage to be governed by their primitive instincts. If a forest vine, curling its tendrils round a victim tree, is vile, then Sheba was vile; if a parroquet, coquetting on a branch to attract its mate, is vile, then she was very vile indeed. Her recovery from that first frenzy of capture was like the dawning intelligence of a child.

Finding herself wooed with fruits, with sweetmeats, with sparkling gewgaws and bright-coloured tissues she could play and deck herself with, she was quick to seize the advantages of her situation. She had but exchanged one ownership for another. She was vain, she was amorous, and the means of gratifying both moods was at hand. The black orchid put forth its buds, with a lavishness of which only the jungle is capable, with an extravagance and impetuosity that shattered sober reason. Her unconsidered sensuality, naïve as a young animal's and equally inoffensive, was constantly renewed from the inexhaustible sources of her untainted vigour. She would play and make love with equal abandon, then sleep, curled up like a little cat, and replenish the springs of her energy.

In those days of madness, Matthew swore he had found that which was better than love. Love was a tangled network, made of so many ill-matching threads that it held neither satisfaction nor security for those who trusted to it; and so, as this most unhappy stage of his existence, he did as many another forsaken lover has done before and since: he glorified lust, and, translating, unwittingly, all that in her was innocence to vice, embarked on that career of self-destruction which, in a man of less formidable constitution, might have succeeded, but which was defeated by his stubborn Flood hardness.

Nevertheless, it left its mark. Meeting Abiathar one day when they were not far from the island of Barbados, the latter looked him up and down, and broke the silence that had enveloped their encounters to say with the bitterness of contempt and exasperation:

"What are ye? Are ye a man or a box of toy bricks—that ye let one woman build ye up and another break ye down?"

It was the measure of his deterioration that Matthew made no retort to this acid observation. He had no energy, even to quarrel with Abiathar.

The days wore on. One day he covered the floor of the cabin with bits of Venice coral and bugles for his mistress to play with; enchanted, she crouched down and poured them in handfuls over her limbs and hair; she was all spangled with little red drops, they formed shoals in the clefts of her shining limbs. She had learned a few English words, but preferred to chatter in her native dialect and to supplement her conversation with gestures. She was ferociously vain, and would snarl like an outraged ape if Matthew interrupted her toilette: a thing as a rule he took pains not to do, for her excessive cleanliness and propriety delighted him, and he liked lying on the bed and watching the long serious performance which often occupied the whole of a morning and might last into the afternoon.

Her indifference to the state of her unhappy countrymen surprised and amused him, as proof of her immense, unconscious egoism. So long as Sheba was comfortable, it did not matter to her what happened to other people. He found at last the explanation of this apparent cold-bloodedness; it was part of her vanity. It pleased her to feel herself different from these poor, anonymous creatures, whose parade on the decks she would watch with sphinx-like coolness; or, with an affectation of indifference that would not have deceived a child, she would preen herself, tweak her robe, rattle her bracelets—even offer some impudent caress to her lover. Nor did she do these things of malice, as a civilized creature might have done, to rouse the envy of her pitiful audience; it was at Matthew such tricks were aimed—to keep him in reminder of herself, of her superiority over the rest: of which, indeed, he needed no reminding.

It was not until they were actually within sight of the port of St. Andrew that she gave any proof of a particular devotion to her lover.

The ship was in hubbub—news having reached the slaves that they were nearing their journey's end. The relative calm of the passage became pandemonium, the terrified creatures had to be prevented from injuring themselves by their last-moment efforts to escape. And Sheba flung herself down and clasped Matthew about the knees.

Her upturned eyes were streaming with tears, her face contorted with agony and slate-grey with fear; she trembled from head to foot. After she had

screamed and sobbed for a long time, and all his efforts to soothe her had failed, he grasped the cause of her misery: she believed that on her arrival she was to be sold among the other slaves. He succeeded at last in convincing her that she should never leave him save of her own free will, and for the rest of the day her docility was pitiful. There were a hundred monkey tricks with which, as a rule, she teased her lover, but these were forgotten; she only wanted to curl up close to him, touching him, obedient as a pet dog to his word or gesture. When he sat down to shave himself—a ceremony which he had omitted for many weeks, so that his cheeks and chin were covered with an immense black bush—even the entrancing spectacle of the hair falling in tufts from the clip of the scissors did not draw a smile from her; when he picked up the razor and embarked on serious business, there was no need to warn her not to tickle, or jolt, or perform any of the antics with which she was wont to interrupt any of his actions that were not directly connected with herself.

It is no matter of ease to shave oneself against the rise and fall of a ship, and the habitual gait of the *Cassiopeia* was that of a drunken man; nor was Matthew's hand as steady as it might have been. She sat watching him as though he were a god, while he swore beneath his breath and tried to time the strokes with the roll of the decks; and when at last, as was inevitable, the razor slipped, and a red line ran out along his jawbone, she gave a scream, and leaping to her feet, started to suck the wound, struggling at the same time to drag the razor from his hand. He had to cuff her away. He staunched the blood as best he could, rubbed alcohol into the cut, and finished his task.

He slipped his hand round his relatively smooth chin, looking reflectively into the glass. Yes, the likeness to Hercules was unmistakable; the strong, blunt features, the salient jaw and heavy brows. It struck him that no woman, unless she were infatuated to the point of madness, would call him handsome again. Africa had had the last of that; Africa, and, perhaps—Sheba.

It was curious how civilization reached out towards a man when he ceased to look like a savage! For the first time for months he dressed himself with care. Even in the little island of Barbados there were people of importance, of more than local standing, among whom he would necessarily take his place. There was that dubious quantity, his uncle Jonathan! It would be amusing, once more to mingle with one's equals, to eat at a civilized board, to observe some sort of a social ritual.

III

They found the island agog with excitement. Cuba had fallen to the British—who with the assistance of three thousand American troops had conquered the citadel of the Morro and captured Havana. Lord Albemarle had evacuated the town of all its Spanish troops, with full military honours, and the Spanish crown was the poorer for territory, battleships, frigates, naval and military stores and fifteen million milled dollars. That which concerned most the shipping personnel collected in Barbados was that the port of Havana was, for the first time in the island's history, thrown open to free trade. The Cuban planters were reported to be paying fabulous prices for negroes, being crazy

to restock their plantations and to exploit the potential wealth of their country, and every merchant vessel was making headlong for the island, to get in on the crest of a great wave of prosperity that might or might not break and leave them stranded: for it was said that, although nominally conquered, there were sufficient patriots gathered under such leaders as Aguiar and Madriga—passionate rebels against the British rule—to make the ultimate outcome of the conquest uncertain.

Although the *Cassiopæia* had been placed on the list of register ships—that is to say, her owners, having warehouses in Cadiz, had permission to export goods to all the islands of the West Indies—and she had therefore less than many to gain by the collapse of the barrier that held out unregistered traders, Abiathar swore profusely on hearing the highly coloured accounts of the harvests that were being gleaned by every vessel that sailed or staggered into Havana during this period of grace. (Actually, no fewer than nine hundred merchant vessels entered the port during the ten months and twenty-four days that the British held the town, and prices slumped accordingly.) He spent twenty-four hours of miserable uncertainty, while he made up his mind whether it would be better to hold by his original intention, of disposing of his cargo at Barbados and sailing back for the second batch before going on to the larger islands, or to make straight for Cuba in the hopes of profiting by the boom.

Meanwhile, Matthew found himself the centre of a clutch of young cousins who were much less interested in the conquest of Cuba than in the first of their English relatives they had ever seen. Enchanted by his arrival, they vied with each other in entertainment of the welcome guest. He rode, walked, swam, shot, played games, danced and made music, always in a cavalcade of gay young people who made jest of their jealousy lest one or another should attract more of his attention than the rest. The girls, although not pretty—their mother was a very plain, capable woman who stood for nonsense from her family—were comely; the boys, sensible, manly fellows, if a little too sober in their outlook for Matthew's taste. Jonathan Flood had seven daughters and five sons: a veritable quiverful. The adored pet of the household was the little boy, Gabriel, a child of five or six, the most sweet-natured, pretty, irresistible creature imaginable, unharmed by the outrageous spoiling he received from his brothers and sisters alike.

It was reassuring to find that they made little of his inheritance—being so used to plenty that envy of another's fortune never entered their minds. Jonathan's fortune must be at least equal to his own, Matthew thought, when they took him riding over the miles of plantation, the acres of storage sheds, the wharves whose barricades bore the mystical monosyllable "FLOOD" all along their frontage. The house itself was maintained in all the tradition of Flood lavishness, and the lawns and gardens that surrounded it had, in less than twenty years, reached a state of mellow splendour that it would take a century of English climate to produce.

"But uncle Jason and his wife, and our cousins, Amelia and Michal: an't they sadly put out you should have all of Grandfather's money?" chattered Judith one day.

One of the boys soberly reminded her that uncle Jason was dead, at which Judith shook her dark curls.

"How can one remember, when a person's only a name? I do wish I could meet my Bristol cousins, all the same. Can't you persuade them to come out here on a visit?" she coaxed Matthew, who laughed outright at the picture of Amelia and Michal in such frivolous surroundings. The "young Jonathans," as he called them, demanded a complete description of the Bristol family, which Matthew gave them, and reaped incredulity for his pains.

"Tan't possible!" "Now you're quizzing us, I'm sure!" "Indeed yes, he's already shown himself a shocking quiz." Matthew's disclaimers were cut short by the second boy, William, whose flashing smile, no less than the black brows, proclaimed a relationship gratifying to both.

"I think cousin Matthew is a brute to leave us so soon for Cuba. What is there there, indeed, that we can't offer him in Barbados? You've yet to come fishing with Henry and me." He frowned reproach on one he had already adopted as a hero.

"You will at least leave us with some pledge of your return," said John, the eldest, who had some of his father's formality, and a colder manner than the rest.

"I'll take Gabriel, if you like." Matthew smiled down at the little boy, who was playing very contentedly with a miniature coach and horses, just at his feet. The child put back his head and smiled upwards with the assurance of an angel. His sisters swooped on him to kiss him, with cries of "The darling pet!" "As if we'd ever let him go!" "The precious one!" from which he emerged chuckling and rosy as a bunch of carnations.

"Will you be my pawn, Gabriel?"

"What is a pawn?"

"It means your family will lend you to me, and, as I'm bound to bring you back, I'll have to come again."

"How long before you bring me back?" Gabriel's hand lay thoughtfully on his cousin's ankle.

"How long would you like to stop?"

The child's eyes, dark as gentian, sought Matthew's with the fathomless penetration of which only childhood is capable. Then they turned to his sisters, who, not being accustomed to this form of jesting, were buzzing with perturbation.

"Not too *very* long, please."

More to tease the girls than Gabriel, Matthew persisted.

"But how long? A month? A year?"

This, however, went beyond the scope of Gabriel's intelligence; he gave a little shake of the head, a half-shy, half-mischievous smile, and returned to his chariot.

"Still, he said he'd come." Matthew, laughing at the vexed faces of the girls, found, for some reason, an odd satisfaction in this. He did not, as a rule, care for small boys, but he was not proof against the charm of Gabriel.

"He doesn't know what you mean!" indignantly exclaimed the eldest girl.

"Don't be foolish, Charlotte; don't you see cousin Matthew is jesting?" The hand of the speaker dropped to play with Gabriel's curls. "You couldn't have Gabriel, you know, unless you has his sweetheart as well."

"A sweetheart? Gad, you've started early, young fellow!" He caught the child under his armpits and tossed him lightly in the air—an experience so

much to Gabriel's liking that he promptly asked for its repetition. "You've started your follies early," said Matthew, with a bitterness that was not lost upon his cousin Judith. A love affair gone wrong! What delicious possibilities might attach to the duties of a consolatrix? was the thought in her sly little mind.

"Gab's sweetheart is Melanie, the daughter of Jochabed, our cook," explained Henry, laughing. "As black as a kitten and just about as mischievous. She and Gab are the same age and were brought up together, but"—he lowered his voice so that the child should not hear—"Mama thinks the time has come to start separating them; so Melanie is learning to help in the kitchen. They play together for an hour, before Gabriel goes to bed."

It was on the fifth day of his visit that Matthew had a conversation with his uncle Jonathan that might, had Matthew paid serious heed to it, have altered the whole course of this history. Meanwhile, Abiathar, having had time to discuss and think the matter over, had decided to see what he could do with his cargo in Barbados before altering his course for Cuba.

CHAPTER X

I

JONATHAN FLOOD presented to his nephew Matthew, from the moment of their meeting, a curious and amusing study, to which his independence of Jonathan's good graces contributed equally in impersonality and good humour. Basically, it was true, what they said of him: that he was a second Jason. But having discovered that coldness, avarice and religion did not pay in the society his business led him to frequent, Jonathan had cultivated so fine a veneer of superficial bonhomie that it was not until one knew him well that one discovered the calculation that moved behind that genial façade. It was, in fact, Jason, but in a less exaggerated, more civilized version. Physically he resembled his brother in no small degree: being short, meagre and bloodless, with thin, flickering eyelids and nervous nostrils—that he could control, however, when it suited his purpose. "A very pretty, categorical sample of a rogue," was Matthew's first judgment of his uncle—modified by his appreciation of Jonathan's success in imposing his assumed character on his associates.

Although he professed to doubt the wisdom of disposing of the timber-yard, which had been for the better part of a century the backbone of Flood fortunes, he entered with approval into Matthew's schemes in connection with the slave trade. As an employer on a vast scale of negro labour, it was not to be expected he should share Jason's views in this respect. He spoke, in fact, in terms of good-natured disparagement of Jason's abolitionist views.

"The views of a little provincial, my dear fellow! Your poor Uncle Jason would never have made a big man of affairs. He was too much at the mercy of his morals. Now, don't misunderstand me!" His short figure, standing in the sun, assumed so much of Jason's perky self-importance that Matthew could have shouted with laughter. "Morals are the mainstay of the community! Can you conceive"—his forefinger sought and found, with painful accuracy, the middle button of Matthew's waistcoat—"can you conceive what society would be without morals?"

"You ain't forgotten, have you, uncle, that I've just come from the Gold Coast?" grinned his nephew.

"Ay, there's a sink of iniquity for you!" Jonathan's eyelids let slip a gleam whose moist gusto was not lost upon his companion. "Tell me about it some time—but not when the young folk are around. And don't forget: morals were made for man, not man for morals. . . . Besides, what the de'l?" (Jonathan had a habit of slurring his oaths, which he had only of latter years, and in deference to local usage, slid into his conversations) "what the de'l's morals got to do with slave trade? We've got to have niggers to work the plantations; demand creates supply, and the wise man takes advantage of it. In my opinion, my boy, you're very well advised to make hay while the sun shines, before Jason's troublesome friends get on with their mischief."

"Well, uncle Jonathan, are you after any bargains—since I'm here on

business, as well as pleasure? I've got a fine lot of Fantees" (fortunately, the Fantees were among those who had best stood the voyage; only seven of their number had succumbed to the wave of disease which had swept the ship during the Middle Passage) "not to mention a fair lot of mixed sorts that I hope to dispose of at the best prices you can offer me in Barbados!"

He saw the gleam of cupidity in Jonathan's eyes before the restless eyelids covered them. With a quick glance across his shoulder—they were standing at the end of the mole, overlooking the harbour, with the usual collection of hopeful idlers lounging in their vicinity—Jonathan drew him aside.

"Now listen: I'm telling you. You won't get first-rate prices in Barbados, because the ordinary fashion of disposing of slaves is the scramble—and a de'lish unsatisfactory fashion it is; but all here seems to stand by it."

"You mean that fashion of roping 'em in?"

Jonathan nodded.

"Them yards over yonder—that's where the slaves are penned, and at a time agreed on the doors are opened and it's catch as catch can. A de'lish silly method; no time to pick and choose, and it's ten chances to one you'll rope in rubbish, for which you've got to pay as much as for the good stuff. They're supposed to sell off the sick ones the day before, but my factor says there's some queer stuff leaks through to the scramble."

Matthew's brows ran into their thick black line of disagreement.

"And if you don't agree to the scramble?"

"You can auction 'em up the town. But, I warn you, the plantations are full at present; full, at any rate, as far as big buying goes. You won't get fancy prices at an auction—and, to my mind, if you're in a hurry to get rid of your stock, you'll do better to scramble 'em."

"Scramble Fantees? Not if I know it," retorted Matthew.

"How many Fantees have you got?"

"Between forty and fifty," said Matthew carelessly.

"Look here," began Jonathan, on a note of friendliness that Matthew could not but admire—it was done so well, with so delicate an absence of exaggeration. He appeared to hesitate; to consider ways and means. "It's certainly demned discouraging, to fetch over fifty Fantees and let 'em go for a song."

"So discouraging, my dear uncle," was the cheerful answer, "that I don't contemplate it. We'll take 'em on to Cuba, if there's no market here."

"Not so fast." Jonathan took a look at his nephew and decided there was no point in trying to bull-doze a man who knew what he was talking about. "Not so fast—and not so loud! We don't want to let all Barbados into the know."

"Why not?" Matthew deliberately raised his voice, so that it rang along the waterfront. "I've got fifty prime Fantees for sale, and the best way of securing a good offer is to advertise the fact—ain't it?"

"Sh-h-h!" Jonathan was in agonies. "Now look here. It goes without saying I can't take fifty niggers off your hands!"

"The suggestion's yours, not mine," pointed out Matthew, beginning to enjoy himself now he had Jonathan on tenterhooks.

"On the other hand, Fantees ain't coming over every day," blurted Jonathan.

"Suppose I was to agree with you for the half—at an advantage, of course?"

"Your advantage or mine?" Matthew could no longer hold back his

laughter. "I'm sorry, uncle Jonathan; I'm afraid there's no bargains going in Fantees. I could, perhaps, stretch a point or two, if it were the Calabar lot."

"De'll take the Calabar lot. I've got two hundred and fifty Bonny niggers working the Halifax plantation, and it takes four of 'em to make a labouring man. What do you want for your Fantees?"

Matthew gave him the price agreed on with Abiathar; Jonathan threw up his hands and eyes in horror.

"You'll never make it. Leastways, not in this island, where quantity counts more than quality."

"That's all right, uncle; I can afford to stand out of my money." But there were Shergill and Peddy to consider as well; he wondered if he was pushing his uncle too far.

"I might see if I could find you another buyer," faltered Jonathan.

"It would be exceedingly civil of you, if you did!"

"But *on considerations*. You're right, of course, not to scramble your Fantees; but when you talk of taking 'em on to Cuba—do you know Cuba's stiff with slavers at this very minute? It ain't any use rushing along there, to find you've missed the market. You're late, my boy, for Cuba, and seeing you're bound to make the Middle Passage again before returning to England, you'd be crazy to add the time on to your journey."

Matthew was silent, wondering how far he could trust his uncle.

"What do you propose?" he asked finally

"I'll take them Fantees," whispered Jonathan hoarsely. "Twenty, mind you! not one more—if I can get 'em on the quiet; ten for Halifax, ten for Triton" (Jonathan had named his house and the original plantation after the ancestral home), "and we'll settle the terms friendly, between ourselves, eh?"

Matthew slowly shook his head.

"You forget I'm a child in trading, uncle. You must discuss the terms with my captain." From this position he was resolved not to budge. If Jonathan happened to be right about the Cuban situation, and if the island as a whole were opposed to the auction, it would be folly to refuse an offer; on the other hand, he was wise enough not to move without Abiathar's sanction.

II

Two days before his departure, he had, with his uncle Jonathan, an interesting conversation. For once, the family was scattered: John, as usual, was absent on his duties as overseer of Halifax, and Charlotte, who was almost inseparable from her elder brother (so much so that the family wondered openly what would happen when she was married to the planter who was regarded more or less as an accepted suitor for "Chatty's" hand), had accompanied him. William was somewhere in the town and the two younger boys at their lessons. Judith had gone with her mother paying calls on neighbours, and Clara, Rosa, Isobel, Alison and Janet were suffering their weekly penance of a deportment class, at which they had begged Matthew not to be present, "since Monsieur Lemaire insists on making such fools of us."

It was a warm, golden afternoon, vibrant with pleasant sunshine, and they went to sit in Jonathan's office: a room at the end of the household buildings,

over which Jonathan, who had long lost interest in conjugal relationships, had his sparse bedroom.

To Matthew's surprise, his uncle, after some fidgeting about, produced and laid in front of him a long, calf-bound volume which proved, on opening, to contain the accounts for the past and current year of the Halifax and Triton plantations. Halifax, Jonathan explained, was a plantation he had bought up from a planter who had gone bankrupt. Its yield was now nearly equal to that of Triton. He would also, eventually, become owner of the Camber plantation, belonging to his wife's father, as there was no son to inherit and the plantation would come to her on the old man's death—an event which could not be long delayed.

Matthew did not attempt to conceal his respect for the fortune that the accounts revealed.

"My own doing, the whole of it. Triton was as good as waste land, when I planted it, twenty-five years ago. A little at a time. Each year reclaiming a few more acres. I started with ten slaves; now, between Triton and Halifax, I employ nearly six hundred. You've got to know your business, to employ six hundred slaves."

"That's amply evident, uncle," said Matthew, allowing the note of respect to creep into his voice. Always he had—he could not help it—this feeling of respect towards riches, especially when they were self-earned. He hoped that some day people would feel the same kind of respect towards him.

"But I'm not as young as I was, and it takes energy, as well as time, to run a place like this."

"John's shaping well, isn't he?"

Jonathan pulled his lip.

"John's a conscientious fellow, but he hasn't the knack of leadership. He'll never work as well for himself as he would for a master. There's something lacking—maybe it's thrust; maybe ability. Tell him to do a thing, and you can count that thing as good as done, and in the best possible fashion. But either he doesn't trust himself, or the ability ain't there."

"Henry or Thomas may shape that way later," said Matthew, passing over William because he knew, as well as Jonathan knew, that William had neither the application nor the desire to become a planter. William's part in life was that of the elegant flâneur; he would spend, with an air, what others earned for him. Little Gabriel was too young to be considered.

But again Jonathan shook his head.

"I've hopes of Thomas, but the lad's a dunce at figures! Any one he employs 'ull be able to get the better of him. And Henry's got too meek and mild a nature, though he's smart enough already to keep the books and he'll spend half the night in tracing a ha'penny that's gone astray. Between 'em they might manage it. But Triton's never worked under two masters. It might—it might not; how's one to tell? It's a pity you've got no interest in planting."

"I have; but perhaps in the results of planting, rather than in planting itself. I wish . . ." He bit back the words. A short silence fell between them.

"Are you going to settle in Bristol?" was Jonathan's next question.

"I can think of nothing less likely."

"You'll not sell Triton?" asked Jonathan quickly.

"Isn't it entailed?" was the indifferent reply.

"I don't recollect; since I have always known I was not to be my father's heir, I ain't bothered myself about it. Still, I'd be sorry to think of the old house departing from the family."

"So far as I'm concerned, it is not likely to do so; although I do not see myself living there. I'm not a stay-at-home, Uncle Jonathan; and, for the present, I want to keep my eye more closely on the slave-trade interests than I could do, penned up there, in Bristol."

"No thoughts of settling down—of marrying and starting a family?"

"None whatever," said Matthew crisply.

"You're wrong, my boy. Marry early, and enjoy the society of your children while you're young," said Jonathan, who had certainly not enjoyed the society of his. He had never, in fact, learned to distinguish them one from another, until they were well into their teens; the solitary exception was little Gabriel, who, probably because he arrived so long after the others—his sister Janet was thirteen when Gabriel was born—stood sharply out in his father's consciousness. "You're right, of course, to be cautious," he added hastily. "Women are as cunning as vixens, and your new position is a dangerous bait. You could maybe marry into the aristocracy, if you chose; but mark my words, it 'ud do you little good. A man like yourself don't want some die-away fine lady"—it was Jonathan's turn to bite his lip; he had, in common with his father, detested James's Miss Merlyn, who had never hidden from her husband's family her distaste for their rough and graceless ways, her shrinking from their robustious humour. Embarrassed, he rushed his point. "Come now; why don't you take your pick here? Here's six good girls—no, seven: for though Charlotte's bespoke, I don't favour her future husband so highly as not to stretch a point in favour of a nephew! Seven good girls from whom to make your choice; each one of whom 'ud make you all you could want of a wife."

"I'm deeply sensible of your generosity, uncle," Matthew was starting to stammer, when Jonathan cut him off.

"Wait a bit. You say you want to keep your eye on your West African trade. Where could you find a more advantageous situation for that than here on our island? You know Doran; he lives here the life of a gentleman of leisure, but he goes over to the Coast at least once a year. If I judge you aright, you ain't got the disposition for leisure—not yet! You can keep in touch with the ships and the Coast as easy as with the plantations; and when you're over there, John can look after the business for you."

The offer held strong temptations. Matthew, with his breath still taken away, found himself considering it involuntarily, while another part of his mind almost shrank from the prospect of marriage with any of his cousins, even the spirited Miss Judith. He was disconcerted and even a little horrified to discover in himself a physical aversion to those comely white skins, high, rounded bosoms, plump wrists and insteps and empty grey or light-brown eyes; for he had learnt the pungency of passion in long, narrow limbs of smoky bronze, of strangely vivid movements that seemed to derive from the springing tendrils of forest vine—so little rapport had they with human gesture. After that, was not any white woman bound to seem as insipid as a puppet?

Yet he saw, and his breath left him at the vision, the idea behind Jonathan's proposal: the uniting of the two great Flood fortunes, the consolidation in

perpetuity of a family alliance that should render each branch invulnerable to outside rivalries. Matthew made no error: if Jonathan gave, *he* would have to give too. For interests acquired by him in the Barbados estates, Jonathan would expect interests in the shipping business. . . .

"Uncle—I could not possibly give you my answer at once!"

"Of course you couldn't. Think it over in Cuba, and if you decide to return, you can be sure of your welcome. Only before you go, you'd better earmark the girl you want!" Jonathan chuckled. "I'm not denying that, with seven daughters to settle, it's going to be a matter of first come, first served!"

So he named Judith—with a sense of shame: because to do so was to take advantage of her ignorance of many things. Of Sheba, waiting for him aboard the *Cassiopeia*; of his lack of love, and of his intolerable greed, that could not bear to reject outright so fantastic a proposal, yet balked at the means of realizing it.

"I take it Clay's still in charge of the family business?" Jonathan was saying.

"No, he's not," said Matthew bluntly. "Clay was never a friend of mine, and I've transferred it to Tom Shergill, who was grandfather's crony, and, with Peddy, is part owner of some of our vessels. Until I buy them out," he added. He had lately started to consider this business of buying Shergill and Peddy out.

His uncle winked at him.

"Buy 'em out," he said, "and then you and I'll start to talk business."

III

The day before he left, Matthew cashed a draft through his uncle's agent and bought presents for all his relations: presents which it took two carts drawn by the island oxen to deliver at the house. It would be difficult to say whether Matthew or the recipients were the more delighted by this performance. It was the first opportunity he had found for the exercise of his generosity, and he chose to do it in the grand manner.

It was pretty to see how all, of their plenty, insisted upon adding to the pile that surrounded Gabriel, who, enthroned in the centre of the great polished table, looked like a cherubic king of carnival by the time his brothers and sisters had done with him. Dumb with bliss among the toys Matthew had found for him, he shone like a star while Alison placed in his hands a long, purple feather, while Judith thrust a velvet rose behind his ear, while knots of ribbon, coloured tassels, bits of tinsel trimming—anything that could delight the fanciful mind of a child—were showered upon him.

"And what did you bring for Melanie, Cousin Matthew?"

"Don't tell him you forgot; he would be so hurt." It was Judith, murmuring behind his ear, as Matthew hesitated. "Here, darling—I got Melanie's present by mistake!" She snatched at random a string of bright cornelian beads, intended as an accessory to a bronze-coloured robe, that she held out towards Gabriel. It was curious, how their slyness and selfishness with each other (perfectly understood and appreciated on all sides: indeed, Alison was con-

sidered "a bit of a zany," because she seldom tricked or bamboozled her family) never manifested itself in connection with the little boy.

Gabriel's lips curled into a slow smile of perfect contentment.

"Lift me down, please; I want to give them to Melanie."

As he trotted towards the open door, his "sweetheart" passed, holding by her mother's petticoats, and staring wistfully into the fine rooms to which she no longer had free entry: a comical little caricature of disproportion, frizzy black head, enlarged by a bristle of tiny plaits, nodding on thread-like neck; arms and legs emerging like twigs from the starched bouffante of a clean print frock. Eyes of extraordinary size and brilliance held prematurely the inconscient sadness of the negro. Jochabed the cook, so enormous that Melanie was lost like a flea in the volume of her skirts, beamed at the little son of the house, as he came trotting towards them.

He placed the string of beads round Melanie's neck, and, keeping his arms there, bent forward, with the serious innocence of childhood, to plant a kiss on his sweetheart's cheek.

"It's high time that sort of thing stopped." John was frowning at the artless spectacle.

"Oh, they're still so very little," murmured Charlotte indifferently.

"It is easier to prevent habits than to eradicate them," was the sententious retort. "Above all, in a character as strong as Gabriel's."

This was the moment chosen by Janet, the *enfant terrible* of the family, for the explosion of her bombshell.

"I'm sure cousin Matthew doesn't think it's a bad habit. *He* likes black ladies—don't you, cousin Matthew?"

A small shriek from Judith was followed by a horrified silence, which John ended by furiously ordering his youngest sister from the room. She went, flouncing her petticoats, looking across her shoulder at Matthew with what almost amounted to a wink of malice in her little brown eyes. The minx! Now how had she got hold of that? Somebody started incoherent apologies for Janet's impertinence, which Matthew laughed aside.

That night there was a grand dinner, to which, on Matthew's suggestion, Abiathar was invited: the splendour of whose appearance, the flaming grandeur of whose beard roused Isobel and Rose to such passions of rivalry that they had almost reached slapping point by the time dessert was reached; and only the excessive gallantry of Abiathar with both young ladies averted an open fracas. Other masculine guests were invited, whose mortification at the success of the dashing captain added, it is to be confessed, to the enjoyment of the Misses Flood.

Dish followed dish, and was consumed with a gusto only possible to eighteenth-century appetites; candles sank and were renewed; a glitter of luxury lay upon the long room, the long table laden with its elaborate glass and silver—a glitter that was enhanced by the soft darkness of the tropic night outside the open windows.

A host of servants, commanded by the white-clad butler, moved like shadows behind the guests, and, at a given signal from Jonathan, the sweet singing of some of the plantation negroes, who had been assembled for that purpose in the garden, came from without. It was almost a banquet; it would, thought Matthew, as an entertainment, have won the approval of Hercules—

whatever might be its motives. Mean as were Jonathan's instincts, he knew when to discard them. What was the point of wealth, unless it was advertised?—and especially with seven daughters to be disposed of, on the most advantageous possible terms! One would never have guessed the anguish that the expenditure of so much money cost Jonathan, as he sat at the head of his board, smiling on a company that formed, each unit of it, some cog in the machinery that ground out the fortunes of himself and his family.

Judith was very coquettish and attractive that night; very nearly beautiful, with her Flood duskiness of colouring, in a sugar-stick-striped silk, with more jewellery than was permitted to an unmarried young lady in English good society. There was no mistaking the authenticity of those diamonds in which Matthew shrewdly recognized part of the bait that was to tempt him into his uncle's net. Life in Barbados was surely not without its attractions. . . .

CHAPTER XI

I

THE conversation, when the ladies left them, with many coquettish injunctions not to linger over "their horrid wine," turned all on the Cuban situation. One of the guests was a young gentleman of mixed Spanish and English extraction, but British sympathies: the son of a Cuban planter, who had witnessed the tragic scenes of the evacuation of June 6th, when the panic-stricken populace of Havana fled before the unforeseen arrival of the forerunners of the British Fleet. In his precise, somewhat pedantic English, he described the terrified crowds that swarmed along roads almost impassable from recent rains, towards the outlying haciendas; the despair of these people when, looking back, they saw the smoke and flames rising from their suburban homes outside the city walls; and the frenzy of the remaining citizens when, owing to the vacillations of the military council, they began to believe they had been betrayed to the enemy.

"Yet the British have done a lot of good, haven't they, Rodríguez—since the surrender?" put in Jonathan, with a touch of smug, British superiority that Matthew thought, in the circumstances, had been better suppressed.

"Oh, yes, that is certainly true, and the majority acknowledge it. Havana was a filthy town, and it is at least fit for human beings to walk about now," was the answer, which drew a smile from most of the company. John Flood leaned forward; instead of smiling, he frowned, as though the triviality did not please him.

"But apart from such minor improvements—the establishment of free trade must have made a great difference to the island?"

Young Rodríguez agreed.

"I think most of the planters are in favour of British rule. The old policy was one of strangulation; we had no opportunities for developing our resources, and it discouraged many of the younger ones with progressive ideas. Given proper exploitation, Cuba is a mine of gold; the question is—shall we have a chance to prove it?"

"Ay, that's so," grunted Jonathan. "There's many a slip—and the peace ain't signed yet, remember."

"There may be a rebellion?" Matthew turned from Rodríguez to his uncle and back again, marking the doubtfulness of the latter's expression. Rodríguez was looking at him, as if they two, and none of the others, understood each other; it was a charming look, flattering to Matthew, less so to the rest, had they been in a state to observe it.

"There is a strong rebel party under Madriga, and there is Aguiar with his guerrilleros. They have powerful supporters—Montaloo, Rapua, Clavo de la Puerta, Cardenas and others. And there's the Church, of course," added Rodríguez, and stopped; Matthew guessed, correctly, that he was a Catholic.

"Ay, 'the Church'!" sneered Jonathan. "Up to its eyes in politics, as usual."

William, always courteous, hurried in, to cover his father's breach of good taste.

"The Romans own a good deal of island property, don't they? It seems natural they should have a say in its politics."

A guffaw broke from another of the guests, a neighbouring planter named Foxley, a widower, on whom Jonathan had his eye for one of the girls. He was reputed to be paying some attention to Janet, who, at sixteen, professed to despise "that odious, snuffy, old creature Foxley."

"They've got a say!—as Albemarle'd tell you, if you was to ask his opinion. God's teeth! The place is rotten with 'em—Franciscans, Dominicans, Benedictines, Carthusians: all with their finger in somebody's pie and stirring up trouble with the niggers. Mark what I say, Flood"—he turned to his host—"Cuba'll be no good to the British till that lot's cleaned out. A hot-bed of intrigue—plots four a penny—that's what you find in any country that's governed by them rascally Papists!"

The young man called Rodríguez had turned very pale; Matthew saw him bite his lips, and admired, involuntarily, the self-control that kept him from breaking into repudiation of these ill-timed and ignorant statements. William was crimson; Matthew guessed that he knew the religious views of his guest—which might, from his nationality, have been obvious to everybody. To create a diversion, he said, addressing Rodríguez:

"I hope your property didn't suffer much in the taking of the city."

Rodríguez paused, and moistened his lips. He was very good-looking, after the cold, classic style that Goya celebrated in his paintings. His features had the high austerity of the authentic grandee; the Flood girls declared that he was "prodigious handsome, but cold enough to freeze you across a room!" It is easy to imagine that their robustious flirtatiousness did not make the impression they expected on the critical young visitor, reared among the subtleties of Spanish society.

He turned towards Matthew with a slight gesture of relief, as though it were something, in this land of barbarians, to encounter a person with the instincts of a gentleman.

"My father's property is in the country, and all we possessed in Havana was a small house left to me in my grandmother's will. If it is destroyed the loss will not be great." Behind the proud, exclusive smile, Matthew sensed a regret the other was too proud to show.

To his disgust, Foxley, too stupid or too tipsy to take a hint, was still fulminating against the Catholics.

"The bloody Jesuits!—as rich as Cræsus. And they ain't content with owning a quarter of the sugar plantations, they've got the whole island under their thumbs."

"You seem very well informed on Cuban matters," cut in Matthew, on a note calculated to provoke the speaker into silence. "May I ask if you have resided there?"—which he knew to be an impossibility, since Cuba had been, since its conquest by the Spanish, a closed country to foreigners. Foxley glowered, then said an unforgivable thing.

"If you don't take my word for it, ask your Papist friend there—if a Papist's word is worth more than an English gentleman's!"

"Father!" William was on his feet, shaking with fury. "Father, will you allow a guest to be insulted at our table?"

Jonathan muttered something and looked aside, John stared steadfastly into his wineglass, the younger boys were giggling and the other guests, Abiathar and the two young men who had been invited to pair off with Clara and Rose, but most annoyingly had focused their attentions on Judith throughout the evening, looked embarrassed after their fashion. William remained standing, glaring at Foxley.

"Sir, I demand an apology from you on behalf of our friend, Mr. Rodríguez!"

"What—apologize to a bloody Papist?" mumbled Foxley.

Young William, his fist drawn back for a blow that would have settled the matter, felt himself pushed strongly aside, while Matthew, who had walked quietly round the table, jerked Foxley by his collar out of his seat.

"Mr.—Foxley?—if that's your name. You'd better get out—before you're thrown."

Before Foxley could reply to this ultimatum—which he could only have done with difficulty, for the band of his shirt was cutting into his windpipe, Rodríguez was bowing to his host.

"I apologize, sir, for the unpleasantness caused by my presence at your table; and as I feel that this gentleman's opinions are shared by others, including yourself, whose courtesy obliges them to repress them, I can do no less than remove the embargo of my presence."

"By God, if he goes, I go!" roared William.

"Hold your tongue," said Matthew quietly, across his shoulder.

"Sit down, Foxley; you're drunk," muttered Jonathan, ignoring, or pretending to ignore, that Foxley was helpless in his nephew's hands. "Well, Mr. Rodríguez, if you're constrained to leave us——" He held out his hand, which Rodríguez chose not to see, bowing once again to his host and once to the company at large. Very straight, very coldly master of himself and the situation, he crossed the room and went out at the door. With a quick glance after him, Matthew let go his hold on the collar and caught Foxley two claps, one on either side of his head.

"We can discuss the matter later, if you like," he said carelessly, and followed Rodríguez from the room.

In the silence that followed—

"I hate Papists," said Jonathan quietly. Then, with one of his bursts of irrational fury, he turned on his son William. "What the de'il do you mean by fetching a Papist into the house?"

"What the devil does it matter if he is a Papist?" shouted William, now so beside himself with rage that tears glittered in his eyes. "He's a delightful fellow and I like him. Why the devil did you have to talk about religion?"

John's pale eyes reflected his cold smile.

"It is a subject which, in the company of Papists, it is difficult to avoid. I dislike Roman Catholics as much as Father does, and I advise you to keep out of their company."

"Who the hell cares for your advice? As a sample of Jesuit education, Rodríguez compares favourably with every one at this table. He's the only one of the whole damned lot that's a gentleman."

"So much of a gentleman," sneered John, "that he'd rather run away than fight."

At these words William made a leap at his brother; Abiathar, who was between the pair of them, raised his huge arm as a barrier, and one of the others, tweaking the tails of William's coat, forced him to sit down. John sat with lowered eyelids, the smile still flickering about his pale, tight lips. Presently he remarked:

"I advise you to keep your eye on William, Father; it's pretty obvious in what direction he's heading"

"You mean towards Papistry?" Jonathan's eyes started, his lips shook with horrified disgust. "If any of my sons becomes a Papist——!"

At the beginning of this scene, Foxley, whose head throbbed from Matthew's castigation, thought it prudent to rise and sneak away. He was a person of verbal truculence but small physical courage, and the prospect of "discussing the matter later" with an opponent of Matthew's calibre was so alarming to him that he chose the better part of valour. Those who saw him go made no comment; he was no favourite with his fellow-planters.

Matthew went round to the stables, where Rodríguez had left his horse, and the two shook hands in the moonlight before Rodríguez mounted. Sitting there on the horse, which was saddled in the Spanish fashion, with the high, double-horned crupper and long straps ending in the box-stirrup which, like the saddle itself, was crusted with a design of silver nail-heads, he had the remote and almost legendary air of his Peninsular ancestry. His figure, which was on the short side, and, apart from the broad, well-set shoulders, very slight, gained in dignity from his posture in the saddle.

"I am glad you are going to Cuba, Mr. Flood, and I hope your stay will be long and agreeable. In spite of what you have heard to-night"—he smiled, but the smile was not one of amusement: it was rather a baring of white, immaculately even teeth—"I assure you the people are very pleasant to get on with."

"I am already persuaded of that," was Matthew's reply. "*Adios, señor*; is that the correct way to say good-bye in Spanish?"

"We have also another saying: *vaya Usted con dios*—go with God," said the young man quietly, as he wheeled his horse.

Matthew stood still for a moment in the moonlight; it was a curious benediction upon his departure—which was so little to be blessed!—and in another mood he would have laughed and shrugged his shoulders on it. To-night, for some unknown reason, it sent a shiver down his spine. It was as though a cold finger reached out from somewhere and touched him, a finger that belonged to a hand: a hand which was only biding its time to reach out as well, and take—what?

He swore, shook himself and turned again towards the house, when the noise of a shot made him start and stand still. Not that there was anything particularly sinister or unusual in the sound; the night watch that patrolled the grounds at night would often save himself trouble and scare a crouching nigger among the fruit trees by firing a shot or two. Matthew had been warned of this by Thomas, who had met him coming in one night with a handful of peaches he had gone out to steal from their sun-warmed wall. "I don't recommend that trick to you, Cousin Matthew!" guffawed the boy. "Hannibal's

a dam' bad shot, but he *has* been known to make a hit—and it 'udn't add to the comfort of your stay if you got a charge of lead in the seat of your breeches!"

No doubt it was Hannibal, in exercise of his duty. Knowing it was what he wanted to believe, rather than what he believed, Matthew continued on his way, but had only gone a few paces when the sound of a horse's hoofs, galloping in his direction, checked him. A horse and rider broke from the shadow of the poinsettias that darkened the long avenue that went for more than a mile between the plantations and ended in a huge, circular sweep, like an English carriage drive, before the house. It was Rodríguez. He threw himself out of the saddle as Matthew ran towards him, but any anxiety the latter might have felt was checked by the expression of mingled amusement and vexation on the Spaniard's face.

"You will think I am completely mad! I had forgotten the thing which has been in my mind from the beginning of this evening, as soon as I saw you. I do not know," he continued hurriedly, "how you will find things when you get to Havana. There are all sorts of stories—that even the British are not allowed ashore, unless they have special credentials to present to the Governor: a matter which, of course, will not trouble you"—a courteous inclination of the head, a smile of finesse, put Matthew into the class which has *entrée* to circles closed to the insignificant. "But I do not know what sort of accommodation you will find, unless you stay in the fort itself. It occurred to me you might find the formalities of the governmental entourage tiresome after a while, and would prefer the privacy of an establishment of your own. Many of the houses have been commandeered for the use of the military staff, but I have not yet had notification that mine has been taken. I should be honoured, sir, if you would allow me to furnish you with a letter to the Governor—with whom my father stands well—asking him to place the house at your disposal for the term of your visit to Cuba."

"It is extraordinarily civil of you, Rodríguez! I can think of nothing that would please me more," returned Matthew—thinking how admirably this solved the problem of Sheba, and of their life on the island.

"You have been 'extraordinarily civil' to me to-night!" said Rodríguez with his dazzling smile, as he remounted. "Only pray do not thank me yet; for all I know the place may be in ruins—in which case I shall have to ask your pardon for a good intention which did not fulfil its purpose! You are sailing by the *Reina del Atlantico*, are you not? The letter shall be delivered to you on board, without fail. By the way"—he turned in his saddle, and the smile seemed painted, seemed permanent, on his moonlit face—"I found down the avenue your Mr.—Foxley: was that his name? Yes; lying by the side of the road. I think he is dead. It has, of course, nothing to do with me."

Once again, Matthew stood perfectly still, as the other, waving his hand, was swallowed by the tree shadows. The coolness, the barefaced mendacity, had taken his breath away—no less than the dispassionate way in which the Spaniard had seen fit to avenge the insult paid to his religion by the dead man.

How tickled Rodríguez must have been by their indignation on his behalf! He had showed no indignation, he had merely acted . . . an appreciative amusement was almost instantly driven out by anxiety for Rodríguez's safety.

Did the fellow think he could get away with murder here—the murder, on British soil, of a wealthy and well-known planter?

As he stood reflecting, the music of the spinet tinkled out through one of the open windows on the first floor. The men had evidently thought it better to join the ladies, for an uncertain baritone joined itself with the sultry contralto he recognized as Judith's, and he guessed she had chosen this means of informing him that she was petulant at his non-appearance, and had found another beau.

As he went up the steps a figure detached itself from the shadow of the portico. It was William. The young man's face was still crimson with his emotions.

"Cousin Matthew, did you apologize to Rodríguez on my behalf? Upon my soul, I was so mortified I couldn't have faced him."

Matthew laid his arm across his young cousin's shoulders, assuring him that Rodríguez perfectly understood his sentiments.

"Were you ever present at such an abominable scene? I suppose it was my fault, and, knowing how Father and John feel about Catholics, I did wrong to fetch him to the house. But he is such a charming fellow, and the only person I have met in ages whose company pleases me. Cousin Matthew, you have seen what this place is like: I swear to God I'll perish of boredom if I remain here. Can't you take me with you to Cuba?"

"No, I can't," said Matthew flatly, but smiling, to take the edge off the refusal.

"Then what about my joining you in Bristol?" persisted William.

"What the devil would you do in Bristol?"

"God knows; there must be things for a person to do. I can't abide this place—I hate planting, and one never meets a creature of intelligence. There's nothing to talk about but planting, planting, planting——"

"Just as in Bristol there's nothing to talk about but shipping, shipping, shipping. If you seek intelligent society you must make for London; but so far as I'm concerned, I haven't the least intention of settling anywhere in the islands of Britain. I mean to travel."

"Well, couldn't you take me with you, as secretary, or courier, or something? I've got to bolt, you know, or else go mad!"

Matthew laughed, clapped him on the back, and pushed him towards the entrance hall.

"You know," muttered William, "I'll never forgive that scoundrel Foxley. He's after one of the girls, but I'm damned if I'll put up with such vermin as a brother-in-law. I'll shoot him first!"

"William." Matthew stood still, holding the other by the shoulder. "You need not do anything. Someone else has saved you the trouble."

"Eh?" said William stupidly. The hand on his shoulder tightened.

"Rodríguez. Don't make a noise. Foxley is dead. Rodríguez shot him." He told him quickly about Rodríguez overtaking Foxley on the avenue; about Rodríguez's disclaimer of responsibility.

"Serve the brute right," said William hotly. "He was so much of a coward, he was bolting before you got back——" He stopped, aghast, as Matthew had been, at the image of Rodríguez, while they raged over the insult paid to him, quietly and in the most matter-of-fact fashion settling the matter for himself.

The eyes of the cousins met; suddenly, without warning, they were in paroxysms of laughter; they rolled about the hall, stifling their indecent laughter in their cupped hands, tears of mirth rolling down their faces.

"It's—it's all very well," gasped Matthew at length, "but it ain't going to be any laughing matter for Rodríguez to-morrow."

William started to wipe his eyes on the ruffles of his sleeves.

"I'll back Rodríguez against the devil for getting himself out of any sort of situation. He ain't a Jesuit for nothing! At least, I don't believe he's a Jesuit himself; you can't be, can you, unless you're some sort of priest or monk? But he has told me he was educated in the Jesuit College at Santiago, and I must say he's caught their habits of mind. What are you going to do about it, Cousin Matthew?"

"Nothing whatever; except I'm going to find a lawyer to-morrow morning, and leave it on oath that I saw Rodríguez out at the lower end of the avenue, and that I met Foxley, living, on my way back. Do you know what the time was when he left?"

"It couldn't have been more than five minutes after you went out."

"Did the others notice Foxley's departure?"

"I couldn't be sure. I think they were paying more attention to us—John accused me of going Papist and I started to fight him, but Captain Crown got in the way."

"You'll have to swear it was at least a quarter of an hour before Foxley left, and chance the others being too excited to notice the time. That gets Rodríguez well away—if he went at the gallop, as he might well have done. It's cutting it rather fine—and it means I went on horseback as well; I'll have to fix that with the groom who looked after his horse for him."

"Nobody takes a nigger's word, anyhow," said William easily.

"They won't have to," was the grim retort. "Let's see. I raced Rodríguez to the end of the avenue; and then—I've got it: I came back by the reservoirs. Not by the avenue; that might be awkward. You met me—by the way, when did you leave the others?"

"After they went upstairs. There was plenty of time for me to have strolled down and met you at the reservoir fence."

"Splendid. And it was then, you recollect, we heard the shot. I exclaimed on it, and you said, 'It's only some dam' nigger among the fruit trees.' Hannibal, by the way, must have heard that shot; it's odd he hasn't turned up."

"Hannibal's having an affair with one of the laundry wenches; you'd probably find him now, if you were to look, rolling in the foul linen in the wash-house!"

"This gets better and better. A rock-bottom alibi for Rodríguez and no difficulties for ourselves. And now I think it would be better if we joined the company. I leave it to you, young William, to look suitably surprised when the corpse turns up."

William grinned.

"My word, there's going to be a fuss! Foxley's got relations, white and black, all over the little islands."

II

The "fuss" started well before dawn, when Foxley's body was discovered by two of the departing guests, who came rushing back to report their find to their host. As Matthew had foreseen, suspicion fixed instantly upon "the Papist," and he did not miss the expression of disappointment in John's eyes—yes, John should have been Jason's son—when he coldly broke up their theories with the information that he had raced Rodríguez to the end of the avenue for five guineas, and had then waved him on his road to the town.

"It is not to say he did not return," pointed out John, quick to see the weak spot in this explanation.

"Why should he return? He had no means of knowing it was Foxley's intention to leave."

"He intended to wait," said John, with evident contempt for the other's lack of cunning.

"Unfortunately for your theory, my good cousin, there was not time, between the sound of the shot and Rodríguez's departure, for him to have returned on foot; had he been on horseback, we could not have missed the noise of the hoofs."

"Of course not," joined in William, with a glance of hatred and triumph at his brother. John stood for a moment, regarding them both with a look of patent disbelief and suspicion, then turned on his heel and went to join one of the search parties which had already set forth to hunt for Foxley's murderer.

"I never met a man I liked less than my brother John," observed William, as he turned towards the decanters that still stood on the deserted dining-room table. "Will it amuse you to join this wild-goose chase, Cousin Matthew? A ride by moonlight is a favourite diversion in our part of the island."

Matthew laughed.

"As I leave to-morrow—no, by God, it's to-day!—I would do better to see to my packing."

"I'll come and help you."

The two men mounted to Matthew's room. As they passed the girls' doors the excited converse within filtered faintly through; they smiled at each other.

The sleepy old valet who waited on the two elder boys having been roused, William's "help" amounted to sitting on Matthew's bed, which was soon littered with his smaller possessions, and smoking innumerable small, yellow cigars of a mark much affected by the island bucks.

"*All for Love!* Upon my soul, there's an intriguing title for you!" Fidgeting, as was his wont, with everything within his reach, William had picked up the little brown volume belonging to Pleydell that Matthew had just thrown out of his travelling valise. "Dryden—I know the fellow's name, but I've read none of his works. Books, in this hole, are rarer than fish in the desert! Pray, Cousin Matthew, lend me this to read against your return; or, if you like, I'll send it on by the next boat that sails for Cuba."

"You can do me a better favour than that. Read it, by all means, and send it, when you've done, to a lady whose name and address in Bristol I'll leave with you."

"One of your conquests?" asked William slyly.

"On the contrary; one of my defeats," said Matthew—less bitterly than he would have spoken a month or two before.

"I wager there ain't many of those," was his admirer's loyal retort, as William sent for paper and pen and took down the name and address to which he was to direct the packet. It was odd, thought Matthew, to find himself giving that once heart-shaking name to William, with no more emotion than he would have brought to the recommendation of a tailor. He had Sheba to thank for that—Sheba, with whom, on the following night (his heart leapt at the thought) he would once more be united.

He had arranged for her transport from the *Cassiopeia* to the *Reina del Atlantico* before his own arrival on the wharf, where he had a gratifying send-off: the whole family insisting on coming down to wish him well on his journey. The girls and their mother remained in two of the Flood carriages—which, with hat-trimmings, parasols and a prodigality of ribbons, presented a floral aspect no less fantastic and pretty than one might see in a Venetian fête; while the boys, even little Gabriel, insisted upon coming aboard.

To his amusement, Rodríguez also was there; Matthew saw him approach Jonathan, and offer the gravest condolences on the unfortunate conclusion to his dinner-party. "It is indeed fortunate that I left before your unlucky friend: otherwise the position for us both might be embarrassing," Matthew heard him say. Jonathan was plainly taken aback; William did not attempt to conceal his delight. The flags of the Foxley warehouses were at half-mast: a fact to which Rodríguez drew the attention of Matthew with a solemnity that enchanted the latter.

Matthew and Abiathar drew apart from the rest for their farewells. The friendliness between them seemed to have been restored—one might have said it had never been broken: so candid was Abiathar's relief at what he regarded as the moral recovery of his charge. He made little of Matthew's taking Sheba on to Cuba; in his judgment, "the black woman" had been put in her proper place, and if Matthew chose to call on her for his occasional diversion, it was no more than what the majority did in his situation.

They discoursed in the friendliest manner of the coming voyage of the *Cassiopeia*, agreeing that the last trip had come perilously near being a loss, but that the deficit in profits could well be made up on the next journey, as there was now accommodation for at least six hundred slaves, as well as the gold, teeth and wax they could supplement with hides, spices and sugar at Havana; and that, thanks to the removal of the exorbitant taxes that had hitherto been charged on trading with the latter port, they would sail for home with a bumper cargo.

"Well, 'Biathar," said Matthew, with a glance to where the girls waved impatient handkerchiefs from their carriages, "you've certainly made a formidable impression among the ladies! You'd better be off and make the most of your powers of consolation for my departure."

To his astonishment, Abiathar grabbed his elbow.

"D'ye think yer Uncle Jonathan 'ud make difficulties?"

"What—?" Catching the other's meaning no less from the anxious twitching of his features than from the serious and urgent tone of his voice.

Matthew with difficulty repressed a shout of laughter. "But, you rogue, you're married already, ain't you?"

Abiathar hunched his shoulders, laid a finger to the side of his nose and winked prodigiously as he replied.

"What don't appear let nobody fear! I take my oath, cock, I can't even recall the ceremony. I got a fancy it might ha' been at Lisbon, the time we got stuck there with the wreck of the *Mossley*; there was a host o' fancy wenches around, and what with being a poor jack tar that didn't know the lingo, an' that porto wine that steals your wits at the first sup—I might ha' run my head into the noose o' matrimony without knowin', almost; though, speakin' honest, cock, an' seeing you're close related to the party concerned, there *was* a priest around—one o' them pimple-faced Jesus-ites, as drunken a sod as ever you'd meet along the Backs and free beyond belief with the ladies. . . . What's the odds? I never set eye on her from that day to this, and never a word passed betwixt us that t'other could understand!"

"Which one is it—Isobel or Rose?" asked Matthew, having thought the matter over. Jonathan was not unlikely to overlook a Portuguese marriage—if it ever came to his ears—with such a bevy of daughters to dispose of.

"I don't know the name of one from t'other; it's the little skit, with a flower behind her ear."

"Janet! My word, you've picked a tartar. But you didn't even speak to her, did you? She was flirting all the evening with the tall fellow from Trinidad."

"That's tactics," said Abiathar solemnly. "The way to catch the female, cock, is to surprise her. And don't you make no error: them bright eyes didn't miss much when I was shufflin' with her sisters." He paused. "There's a fine bunch, cock, for you to take your pick from."

Matthew gave him a good-natured shove.

"You mind your affairs and I'll mind mine. Good luck to you with uncle Jonathan, and if you fetch your bride along with you to Havana, you'll have no warmer welcome than that of your future coz!"

III

During the short, pleasant voyage to Cuba, Matthew amused himself by instructing Sheba in some of the usages of polite society—although it was not clear how such lessons would serve her. On the first day or two, sullen with her week's captivity, she would hardly pay attention to him, sulking in a corner and baring her teeth whenever he went near her.

"If you don't mend your ways, my beauty, you'll get a thrashing, and it'll be a different sort from that you're used to." He picked up a stick to make his meaning clear. She spat and chattered with fury, but, after this not unreasonable display of bad temper, quickly recovered her spirits, and was as clever as a monkey in responding to the demands of her teacher. It was as fascinating as teaching tricks to an animal, and if there were moments when he hesitated, wondering if he were destroying some part of that which, for him, constituted her essential charm, he found he could not resist the daily development of some new allure—albeit at the sacrifice of her former savagery.

He taught her to wear a gown with modesty; how to manage the train, and

how high to raise the petticoat without forfeiting discretion. Her hair, too stiff and springy to hold the combs he bought her, concealed itself beneath a turban of tissue, whose tassels of seed-pearl dangled on her shoulders, and the simple bangles of her childhood, too tight to be removed (and which, not for sentiment, of which she had none, but because she could not bear to part with anything which was hers, she refused to have cut off), were hidden by the wide elaborate bracelets that covered the whole of her slender forearms.

Where now were Combre mud, green crocodiles basking in the sun, the smell of the camp fire and the dried heads of the enemy on stakes around the chief's hut? They were all part of a fading memory that each successive day of the new life helped to blot out. If they recurred to her mind at all, she flicked them away—like smuts upon the surface of her new splendour. There is no doubt she rejoiced in her metamorphosis from the raw child of African forest to the product of extreme sophistication which met her each time she faced her mirrors.

In addition to the arts of self-adornment, he taught her to use the implements of the table—instead of snatching everything with her hands; to make a curtsy—an instruction which dissolved Matthew in fits of laughter, and roused the temper she always displayed when she thought he was laughing at her; and to eliminate from her conduct such primitive habits as scratching and spitting—at least in public places. And, having mastered these rudiments of social behaviour, she was no longer confined to the cabin.

The *Reina del Atlantico* was carrying a full quota of passengers, and the sensation caused in the saloon by the appearance of Matthew's black orchid is easier imagined than described. Outraged British matrons turned away their heads while their husbands chuckled and envied Flood alike his impudence and his exotic companion. Spaniards and creoles ignored superbly the existence of Sheba, while acknowledging Matthew with the haughtiest of bows; a few rich mulattos made no attempt to hide their interest and curiosity, and made instant and friendly overtures, which Matthew politely parried. He had no intention of becoming involved in dubious acquaintanceships before reaching the island, any more than he had the intention of concealing the fact that he had a black mistress. Let Cuba once get wind of his wealth—a matter it was not likely to overlook—and prejudice could take a back seat, while morals were conveniently forgotten.

Long before they reached the island he discovered that he was more wildly infatuated than ever. The fact of his ever having considered marriage with Judith seemed more and more fantastical; apart from the lack of sympathy between them, he realized more clearly, each day that separated him from Barbados, the restrictions such an alliance would place on his manner of living. To be free became his obsession—to which, for the present, he was content to sacrifice all the glittering prospects raised by his uncle Jonathan. Liberty of thought, conduct and action were the only things worth striving for, and if wealth did not confer these, what was the use of it?

He brought to the renewal of his passion for Sheba all the vigour of his restored physical energy and of this determination towards liberty that, half-unconsciously, took her for its symbol.

CHAPTER XII

I

MY LORD ALBEMARLE can hardly have been gratified to receive the letter introducing Mr. Matthew Flood, and begging his lordship's interest in finding that gentleman lodging in a house of whose existence the Governor knew as little as of its whereabouts.

He already had his hands full with disgruntled creole bigwigs, with infuriated chapetones, with the tiresome old Bishop Morell (whom he had finally to dispatch to Florida), with the governor of Santiago, whom half the Cubanos still insisted upon regarding as their supreme authority; with Catholic plots, with local patriots sworn to reconquer Havana at the first opportune moment, with the jealousy and opposition of Spanish officials, with the sickness of his English troops, many of whom had succumbed to the climate. In addition, he was doing all in his power to speed up repairs of the damage done by the bombardment, and, as Rodríguez said, to establish some sort of order and decency in streets which, the repositories of ancient filth, were breeding-grounds of the diseases which had already decimated the foreign battalions.

A patient and tactful man, his long-suffering broke down before the invasion of his hardly conquered territory by the hosts of interested or purely frivolous parties who came pressing on the heels of free trade, and appeared to regard Cuba—and Havana in particular—as the rightful stalking-ground for their private ambitions.

So his reception of Matthew's credentials was testy.

"The Bristol timber-merchant's grandson?" (He had a memory that was the despair of his staff.) "There's a son in Barbados, isn't there?—and old Flood was well dipped in the slave trade, wasn't he? I suppose that's what the young one's after. Damnation. If old Rodríguez wasn't one of our best supporters I'd leave Master Flood to shift for himself. I've had enough of these fellows that come breaking their necks to see what they can grab while the pantry door's ajar." He jerked the plan of the town towards him and ran a ruler along the honeycomb of the streets. "Is that the house? Find out if it's in occupation—and for God's sake spare me an interview with the fellow."

"So here's your palace, my queen!" grimaced Matthew, in introducing Sheba to her new abode. "We shall see what kind of a business you make of governing it!" He was not pleased with the coldness of his reception at the Morro, and promised himself the gratification of ignoring gubernatorial circles for the rest of his stay.

Her savage timidity, always roused by strange surroundings, soon gave way to delight, as she ran through the spacious chambers. She had not learned to observe, and her survey was of the most superficial, but she clapped her hands and rolled with kittenish abandon on the deep divans that stood in Moorish fashions along many of the walls.

"No mo' ship!" She ran to look over the gallery that overhung the patio, scented and bright with summer blossoms. Suddenly she leapt at Matthew,

half strangling him with an embrace as sudden and violent as that of a young tigress.

"I see I shall have to teach you the airs that go with your new station!" Straightening his ruffled hair, he gave her a playful slap and pushed her aside. Vaulted ceilings, lozenged with colour, the curtained arches opening on the galleries satisfied some part of him that called for the magnificent and exotic. "Not much like Jimmy Montcalm's, is it, my savage?" he teased her, knowing full well she hated reminders of her brief coastal past; seeing that she bared her teeth, he cuffed her again, but gently, so that it was like a caress. "Take care. Now you've got to behave yourself; for I shall introduce you to society, and if you shame me, I shall beat you."

She pouted, no longer alarmed by his threats, flashed him a sidelong look of intelligence, and lipped the string of amber beads that was slung round her neck.

Combre river was now very far and dim; things she had learned at first by rote were now assimilated into a nature plastic enough to receive the imprint of a personality whose power over her own was the power of love. His words might puzzle her; his looks never. She knew at a glance when her actions pleased, angered, amused or disgusted him, and the awe and obedience she had once given only to the chief, her father, she had transferred, by so simple and inevitable a process that she hardly noticed it, to Matthew. For him, according to the traditions of her people, she would willingly have lain down her life—which did not prevent her from indulging a dozen teasing and mischievous tricks which she had discovered entertained him and inflamed his passion for her.

Sometimes she felt tired, and a little languid, under the oppression of a standard of living that ran contrary, not merely to her brief experience of life, but to all the traditions of her race; and sometimes she ached with a nameless loneliness for which there was no solace but her lover's arms, into which she crept with the mute appeal of an animal which seeks reassurance from the one human being it knows among the vast puzzle of the universe. It was he who led her blindfold along the path labelled civilization: a path which has meant doom to so many of her kind. And her trust in him went hand in hand with her love.

"First you must have an attendant!" he told her. "For I am not going to spend the whole of my time playing at love with you."

"A 'tendant?"

"A servant, to wait on you; to put on your clothes and go out with you when you ride into the town."

"You gib Sheba a nigguh?" Her eyes sparkled with eagerness, the tip of her tongue appeared greedily between the pearly rows of her teeth. Her eagerness startled him; then he laughed.

"So you want a nigger, do you? And how are you going to talk to her? These Cuban blacks talk Spanish."

"I soon teach dem white man's talk," was the confident reply. "I soon make nigguh 'bey me. I say 'Come,' and she come: I say 'Fetch dat,' and sh fetch it—huh? Nigguh—black trash—huh!" With her movement of effortless grace she swept down the room, with so good an imitation of the fine ladies of the *Reina del Atlantico* that Matthew was taken aback.

"Upon my soul!" It was the first time that she had shown him the completeness with which she had come to dissociate herself from her own people, and, in some way, he was shocked by it. His mind swung back to Omo: to the magnificent types and the nobility of physique he had seen there; to the curious grandeur of an African chief reigning over his people. . . . Was it possible she had forgotten all that? Forgotten likewise the miserable specimens of white folk from among whom he had taken her?

He had not, however, the brutality to remind her. That sharp observation of hers, together with her personal vanity, had registered all too clearly the way black folk were treated; and so long as her vanity did not get out of bounds, it might be both to her and his advantage to regard herself as outside the ban which civilization placed on her unhappy people.

I

Society was not slow in flocking to the house in the calle Colón. The legends of señor Flood's negress were all over the town; modistes and dressmakers had their tales to tell, and there was the gossip of the household. Even the ladies—at least, the more spirited—were not to be done, by a mere matter of convention, out of the thrill provided for Matthew's guests. It was not, they argued, excusing themselves for their boldness, as though she were one of the common island women.

"A genuine savage, dressed up like a duchess! And it's even said the creature can sing and dance!"

The nights fumed with torches, the surrounding streets were blocked with the state coaches and volantes of invited guests, a guard had to be formed to hold back the rabble that thrust upon and incommoded their superiors in eagerness to share the spectacle of the richest and most elegant of Cuban society, as it surged from its vehicles and filled the brilliantly lighted patio with its laughter, its perfumes and the rustle of its satins and brocades.

"Oh, how laughable! Quite a child of nature!" they twittered, when Sheba, forgetting her training, pulled down her bodice to scratch a rounded breast.

"Men are very coarse in their tastes, really," was whispered among the women. "For my part, I can't see what Don Mateo Flood finds so attractive in such a low, uncivilized creature."

"He will soon find he has made a mistake in thrusting her on Havanese society!" An outraged dowager drew her daughter aside.

A red-faced member of Lord Albemarle's staff twitched Matthew's elbow to mutter in his ear:

"You've got 'em all on the raw, my boy! Damme, there ain't a woman here, white or coloured, who can stand up to her, and I advise you to look after your black diamond, so long as you remain in Cuba."

Low or uncivilized, Sheba outshone them all. The most glowing satins faded against her warm, ebony skin; gold paled when she removed it from her gleaming flesh; a pearl became a symbol of occultism when placed in her ear, and dwindled to a mere chalky marble when returned to its velvet bed. There were glances of hot envy and plain, unbridled lust in the heavy-lidded eyes of creole gentlemen, and angry flashes in those of the Havanese belles who found

themselves overlooked for the dark Splendour that paraded the apartments, extending a hand with the deportment of a queen. Those who would have made a jest of the occasion were quelled by Matthew, who, ever at his mistress's elbow, preserved a scrupulous correctness of demeanour that gave warning to those who might have been forgetful of their manners.

They came once, those jealous, those outraged ladies, but not again. The scandal spread over Havana, and gradually Matthew's receptions came to be attended by men, and by such local Phrynes as these chose to bring with them.

III

Although he delivered his nights to orgy, Matthew was not forgetful of the main business that had brought him to Havana. Every day processions of sea captains and merchants were being received at the fort. Unsettled as the town's future might be, there was much activity in mercantile circles, and bargaining was in full swing for the plots of land adjoining the harbour, on which rival firms were anxious to erect their warehouses. French, Danes and Germans jostled each other in the narrow streets and under the arcades where business was done with sleepy creoles, well alive to the advantage of their position, and maddeningly evasive when it came to the signing of contracts.

It was not easy, with his ignorance of Spanish, for Matthew to gain the entry into trading circles which, although French was widely spoken in aristocratic society, carried on all their business in the debased castellano of which he had not a syllable.

It was about a fortnight before he was lucky in striking up acquaintance with an Englishman, Clark, attached in a minor capacity to Lord Albemarle's staff, who had a good working knowledge of Spanish, and who readily agreed to accompany him as interpreter whenever his duties at the fort allowed.

"A damned standoffish lot, these Spanish; and maybe they aren't to be blamed for being out to make all they can get out of their misfortunes. If there's one thing that will comfort a Spaniard"—he laughed good-humouredly—"it's money: though from the way they handle it, you'd imagine it was an insult to offer it to them!"

"So I've already gathered," grimaced Matthew, still sore from some tentative efforts to do business with the lordly proprietors of the waterfront, whose dilatory methods were not less irritating to an impatient person than their haughty indifference to the credentials Matthew so confidently presented. "Nevertheless, if I crawl to them, I've got to justify my presence here. I want land, and I want labour; and while the labour's going on, I want to secure my cargoes against the arrival of our ships. You'd say these fellows didn't want to trade—from the insolence with which they meet one's proposals!"

"Make no mistake; they're keen enough on trading. But don't forget, trade's devilish easy, for once, and competition has the upper hand. It's not the Spanish you're up against, so much as your own rivals in the shipping industry."

Matthew thought this over before replying.

"There's something in what you say: but I've noticed a thing I can't, for the moment, account for. It is, that while Tom, Dick and Harry seem to have

nothing to do but send up their names, and are ushered instantly to the sanctum sanctorum, I, on half a dozen occasions at least, have been left kicking my heels among understrappers."

Clark gave again his pleasant, easy laugh.

"It means most likely that Tom, Dick and Harry have been at pains to provide themselves with a password. You've not yet given yourself the trouble of paying your duty to His Excellency, have you?"

"On the contrary." Matthew flushed angrily. "My letters were in His Excellency's hands within an hour of our landing; they were not, apparently, thought of sufficient consequence to procure me an audience."

"Tut-tut. Albemarle's up to his neck and ears, and unless a particular request for an audience was proffered, it's more than likely he passed your papers on to one of the secretaries. I didn't have 'em. Poor devil—he's nagged every hour of the day, and sees on an average sixty people between breakfast and lunch, each with his own little axe to grind. Still, it might be as well for you to put in a word on your own behalf. I'll see what can be arranged."

"Why? Does common trading come under the jurisdiction of the fort?"

"Not precisely: but I'll tell you the position. Havana's pretty well divided, now, between those who won't accept British jurisdiction at any price, and those who've made up their minds to reap all the benefit that's going of the new régime. Trading circles as a whole favour the British, and are so anxious to stand well with the new government that a word's enough to tip the scale in favour of anybody who can produce evidence of his popularity up at the fort. Oh, you'd be surprised!" he continued, as Matthew made a sound of impatience. "Nothing goes unobserved in Havana, and it's well known who's got the entry and who hasn't, at the Residence. You'd perhaps not credit it, but there are some wily birds who keep popping in and out, though they never get farther than an antechamber, just for the sake of the credit they get for their seeming familiarity with His Excellency's staff!"

"I've little taste for boot-licking," said Matthew wryly, "but if my livelihood depends on it, I suppose I can do it as well as anybody else!"

"Oh, you'll find His Excellency a very good fellow, and you need be under no apprehension as to your personal dignity," rejoined Clark. "I only hope," he added, "that there's no truth in a rumour that's going round the fort—keep it to yourself: that Albemarle's resigning. No wonder if he does; the amount of work he's had to tackle since we took over is enough, God knows, to kill a younger man."

"Well, I shall be uncommonly grateful for any assistance you can give me," said Matthew, as Clark paused.

"I can at least advise you as to quarters most likely to entertain your propositions; we've had a number of these stiff-necked old creoles through our hands at the fort, and one or two have fallen to my lot to deal with—so long as you treat them with sufficient ceremony, they're not bad fellows to get on with," Clark assured him.

They spent a morning strolling among the warehouses and mercantile offices, at the end of which Matthew was baffled and angry, Clark mystified by the lack of response, in one instance at least the downright snub, they received. Creole suavity ran like oil—and amounted to nothing. If they got as far as quoting prices, these, a moment later, were disclaimed; muscovado and

leather melted, it appeared, in the smoke of cigars that were ceremoniously proffered; building plots were submerged in the rich brown wine of Jerez, which the merchants seemingly preferred discussing to the transport of their merchandise. Everywhere politeness, politeness: but the swarthy gentlemen who received Matthew and his companion wore the air rather of wealthy dilettanti, than of men of affairs, as Matthew knew them. And nothing would tempt them from the suave impeccability of their self-sufficiency.

He stood in the street, scowling, while an English trader he knew by sight ran down the steps of an adjacent office, stuffing what was obviously a bill of lading into his pocket.

"God damn them, Clark! There's obviously trading going on."

Clark shook his head; he was much perturbed, as well as humiliated, by the little benefit his company had brought to Matthew.

"I suppose I had better see His Excellency," the latter was muttering.

Clark caught his arm.

"Will you allow me to speak frankly?"

"Why not?"

"Let us find some better place for conversation."

"Come to my house. There we shall not be disturbed."

There, in the patio, with the embarrassment of a man not given to interfering in his fellows' affairs, Clark told him of the prejudice his manner of living had caused, and Matthew was at first incredulous, then scornful and openly resentful of the implied criticism on his private life.

"Are you suggesting that Havanese morals are offended by my household arrangements in the calle Colón?"

"Morals don't enter into it," returned Clark bluntly. "The Havanese don't concern themselves about morals, but they put a devil of a value on discretion. Never more so than to-day, when prudent folk keep their mouths shut and their ears open. You've got a damned odd crowd around you, Flood, and you can't blame people for playing cautious when their own credit's at stake."

"I don't know what the devil you mean!"

"You must know that the whole of the island is seething with plots, and that all sensible people are not only keeping out of them, but avoiding any sort of society that might lay them open to suspicion. Nobody's more anxious to keep out of that than the traders, whose prosperity depends on their standing well with the government; and with the whole of Havana agog with spies of both factions, they avoid like the plague any dealings with persons on whose disinterestedness they are unable to depend."

"Are you telling me"—Matthew's eyes were wide with astonishment—"that I'm suspected?"

"I don't say so. I've only heard . . . that you entertain people who are well known as party members and opposed to British rule on the island. If that titbit of local gossip reaches the Residence, your stay here is over. For business reasons you'll perhaps look into it."

"I know nothing of such people," returned Matthew, after a frowning pause. "What interest have I got in Havanese politics—who don't even know a word of the language, and care as little as that—that beetle, who holds the island, so long as my personal interests are secured? And if I've got plotters

on one side, no doubt I've got them on the other, if, as you say, the place is honeycombed with them."

"There's not much doubt about that," agreed Clark. "I only point out that it's to your disadvantage to have your house marked down as a hot-bed of political activity, and that the sooner the better you put yourself straight by a visit to the fort and getting rid of some of your rag-tag that ain't too well viewed—I may as well tell you—by His Excellency's staff."

"Confound them! They accept my invitations readily enough!"

"The same might be said of myself," grinned Clark, "and I've only tried to make some return for hospitality by giving you a warning before it's too late. I'm sorry if I have offended you."

"Don't let that trouble you. I'm not so much of a fool as to disregard a well-meant warning; but I am not disposed to curtail my hospitality—which is my pleasure—nor do I see how to get rid of the undesirables without giving offence to those with whom it is certainly to my advantage to stand well." He was thinking of the young planters, whose goodwill it was essential to cultivate in view of the slave cargo expected by the *Cassiopeia*.

"There's Luis López, who's a well-known admirer of Aguiar, one of our toughest opponents; we've had him and his friends covered from the start of the British occupation."

"Why not arrest him, if you've got the evidence?"

"You don't destroy the stray hornet when you're out to exterminate the nest. In any case, how did he come to be a guest in the casa Rodríguez?"

"I suppose he came with others. The ones whom I invited were friends of Estebán, whose names he wrote for me on the paper he gave me when leaving Barbados; but they have brought others with them. . . . I will at least take your advice so far as calling upon the Governor is concerned; for I am not disposed to forfeit my advantages by neglecting to pay tribute to the uneasy conscience of Havana!"

"There's a scruffy little priest, as well, you might do well to get rid of."

"Come!" He roared with laughter and clapped Clark on the back. "You'd not have me grudge a dish of meat to the saviour of souls? Nothing tickles me like seeing the Church cast off its lendings and wallow like a pig in the trough its principles oblige it to condemn. Spare me my little priest, Clark!—for he's the titbit of my enjoyment; and, gad, he's too drunk to be dangerous. . . ."

IV

She stuck the comb of tortoiseshell in her hair: now at this angle, now at that. Her ebony limbs curled under her, she sat stark naked on the couch, engaged in her favourite occupation—the adornment of her lovely person, while the girl whom Matthew had given her for her handmaid held the mirror, moving it right or left at her mistress's imperious command.

"Dis way! Dat way!" The sticklike arms of the little negress ached—the mirror was a large, square one, in a frame of varied marble—and her eyes narrowed with an expression the goddess on the couch ignored.

Much as Sheba loved her new finery, she loved better to be naked, to stride

across the marble floors with bare, panther-like tread, to press her rounded breasts and delicate flat haunches against the cold surfaces of long looking-glasses that reflected her beauty; inconsequently to summon the slave and have perfumed water poured over her and scented oil massaged into her languid limbs. She who was always passionately clean had learned many of the refinements of the toilette from the women who visited the house at night; she had learned to rub a vermilion paste on her lips and on her nipples, to polish the nails of her fingers and toes until they shone like glass. She had even discovered a dark ointment that, applied behind her shoulder, obliterated the shameful mark of her branding. Above all, it was her delight to keep her attendant running on a thousand errands that her mischievous brain invented, for the sheer pleasure of tyrannizing over the only human creature whom she had ever had completely at her mercy.

What that meant to one whose short life had been lived entirely at the mercy of others is hardly within the scope of imagination of the civilized mind. Somewhere beneath that surface of unthinking pleasure lay a little core of pain, of whose existence Sheba was not even aware: that evinced itself sometimes in actions as ungovernable as a reflex. She herself had been made to suffer: how or why was not even clear to her mind; and, without deliberation, without malice, the instinct was there to pass the suffering on to another—as though, by doing so, she might rid herself of it.

The negress Linda sighed noisily and shifted her weight from one hip to the other. She dared not disobey; at the same time, she was not going to spare this favoured specimen of her race the spectacle of her discomfort. She whined a protest at the pain in her arms.

"Stan' still, yo' no-'count, idle nigguh." It was so she had been addressed herself; dispassionately she passed it on.

Again Linda's eyes narrowed and she muttered something in the low-class Cuban Spanish Sheba did not understand. She stood there, hating deeply, purposefully, and envying no less, that indifferent Splendour that coiled itself like a dark snake and arrogated to itself powers which Linda had been taught belonged to white people. Between white and black there was only one relationship that Linda knew of: absolute domination on one hand, absolute submission on the other. A black woman was there to give a white man what he wanted; and when it was given, she crawled away and made herself scarce, until the next time. Her sex resented, no less than her traditions, this assumption, on the part of a creature no superior to herself, of rights and qualities that belonged to the whites. Her flesh resented the pinches and scratches Sheba bestowed on her when she failed immediately to fulfil the other girl's commands.

"Lif' dat glass up highuh! Don' yo' see I cain' see not'ing but de middle ob ma body, yo' stupid gal?"

The glass wavered, was lifted an inch or two, slipped, and the screams of the girls mingled with its crash upon the marble floor. Covering her face with her hands, pressing her bent knees together, the girl Linda continued to scream—short, stabbing shrieks: while from Sheba's lips poured the forgotten language of her childhood. Leaping from the couch, she cut her foot on a shard of broken glass and screamed again, leaving a bloody track as she

bounded across the room. Through the curtained archway was Matthew's chamber, and thrown across the chest his riding clothes, among which lay his crop. . . .

She came into his arms, when he returned, purring like a kitten, and he knew, as he always knew when she was in this mood, that she had been misbehaving herself.

"You've been stealing, you little thief!"

She had a jackdaw's love of pilfering: would rather steal than be given a thing—an eccentricity to which it amused him to pander by hiding the presents he brought her, which she would invariably find, however cunningly they were concealed. She looked at him with the eyes of a dark angel, nuzzling into his shoulder.

"Not stole. Sheba good gal—not stole not'ing."

"I swear you've been bad about something, my precious devil!" muttered Matthew. He was in a good mood; the audience with His Excellency had gone off well, Lord Albemarle had shown himself not oblivious of what was owing to a grandson of Hercules Flood, and he had obtained some valuable introductions to several of the local big-wigs, whom Clark advised him, at the earliest opportunity, to entertain. Matthew had enough sense to know that it would be bad policy, on these occasions, to flaunt his black orchid. He must, above all, establish himself with the Havanese traders as a serious individual: which need not in the least affect his private diversions.

"It is time you were dressed." She was wearing one of the muslin bed-gowns that he had managed to persuade her were a necessary tribute to propriety, even when alone with him. ("Don't you see?" he had told her. "If you are naked, it seems foolish for me not to be the same: and white people do not walk about uncovered, like savages.") "You know we have our usual company, and you will not be prepared to receive them unless you make haste. Where is Linda? She ought to be dressing you."

She wound her arms about him and mumbled something. Clearly she had something she hoped he would not discover. Matthew laughed, yawned, embraced her, and dismissed the trifle from his mind.

V

There must have been a mischievous spirit abroad that night: a night of heat and lassitude, when no one was inclined for dancing or gaming, when the guests, reclining round the fountains, watched with the dull eyes of satiety the *tocadores*, the mountebanks and jugglers whom, following local customs of hospitality, Matthew had engaged to amuse them. A languid politeness took the place of merriment; yawns were stifled, foolish sprees were started, and petulantly abandoned.

The servants' liveries were stained with sweat as they handed round the wine of which already most of the company had partaken too freely. One of the girls had fallen asleep, her wrists in the fountain basin to cool them, her head on her arm; so profound was her slumber that she did not even stir when another, for mischief, dropped sugared almonds into the open neck of her gown.

Playing cards with four of his guests—two of whom were only known to

him by sight—Matthew felt his attention straying, felt a growing dissatisfaction with his company and his surroundings. It was not easy to “place” foreigners, and the polished manners and unfailing ceremoniousness of the Cubanos made it more difficult than normally to pass judgments on the probable social standing of these people who, thanks to his own carelessness and their perseverance, had become *habitués* of the casa Rodríguez. But whether it was due to his sharpened perceptions or to Clark’s warning, he now recognized that they were, for the most part, a “flash” assembly, from which the few whom he knew as Estebán Rodríguez’s friends held themselves a little aloof; not in any marked fashion, but with a touch of superiority and—he could have sworn it—derision at the gullibility of a host who imagined that, in this raffish company, he entertained the cream of Havanese society.

Let their politics be such as they pleased—he was not going to be fooled in this fashion! He had no aspirations to mingle in the hidebound circles of the aristocracy, where, he was informed, etiquette was like a whalebone corset, and the least deviation placed one beyond the pale; but one need not, in one’s search for diversion, descend to the stews. It did not require much perception to remark that several of his guests would have been more at home in the brothels than in Estebán Rodríguez’s dignified house.

It also piqued his pride as host that the evening seemed to be going so badly, and as it was incumbent on him that his guests, however inferior they might be, should be entertained, he cast about him for some means of creating a diversion: which caused him to play badly and to sacrifice his own and his partner’s hands to the superior concentration of their opponents.

“Don Jaime!” one of the girls was crying. “Where is Don Jaime? Let him amuse us with one of his stories.”

“*Madre de dios*, Jaime has more important affairs in hand to-night.” The speaker laughed and looked slyly at his friends.

“Then where is *la bellísima negra*?”

La bellísima negra rolled her eyes and flashed her teeth, but even she, it seemed, was too languid to dance that night. Or did she also, in the strange growth of her pride, which Matthew had recently marked, not without uneasiness, regard the company as beneath her? She remained, spread on her couch, flaunting the peacock-feather fan he had given her; and it seemed to him that he had been foolish, been wasteful, to squander her on such a gathering.

“Where is Don Jaime?—and what more important affairs has he than playing with us?” the girl was whining.

“Don’t you know it is his wedding day?”

A chorus of incredulity greeted the rejoinder.

“Not possible! There was no wedding to-day.” The voices were indignant, for a wedding was an event that provided celebration for all classes, and out of which the ladies of the town did particularly well, as not a few of them were skilled dancers, and in request as performers, while the rest profited from the generosity and lavishness that surrounded a Havanese wedding.

“You are ill-informed, my love-birds!” (It was the man against whom Clark had warned him, Luis López, who spoke.) “It is three days since our friend left for his sweetheart’s home in the country, where the ceremony took place.”

“What a trickster! What a mean fellow!” they chorused, bitterly recalling

that the culprit had offered no farewell feast to the playmates of his bachelorhood. Even the girl by the fountain was roused to swell the chorus of indignation; she sat up blinking, and as she gathered what had happened, the tears started to swim in her beautiful dark eyes.

"What a shame! What a low evasion!" She started to sob, half tipsily, half with childish disappointment. "And to think of all we've been through, with the siege, and then we're cheated of a little enjoyment!"

All the girls, taking their tune from her, started to pout and sulk—except Sheba, who, not knowing what it was all about, continued to flash her white teeth in her rich redundant laughter, while she plagued her lover with a feather torn from the superb plumage of her fan. Like a duck to water, she had taken to this atmosphere of wasteful magnificence, to the wanton luxury of the *milieu* in which Matthew had placed her. She loved the sensation of being always a little drunk, of rousing her lover's passions with tricks she copied from the other girls, and of reigning like a queen over assemblies which she was quick enough to realize were convened expressly that he might display her and bask in the envy of those who had no such jewel to exhibit.

"No feast, no wedding! What ungraciousness!" the girls went on complaining.

"That's too bad!" cried a tall, rakish-looking fellow in a coat of bright orange satin that went hideously with his sallow skin. "Come now, the love-birds can't be disappointed. What's to prevent our having a wedding ceremony, here and now? All's at hand—the bride, the bridegroom!"—he pointed unsteadily at Sheba and Matthew—"and even the priest, if he's not too drunk to remember his office!"

The suggestion was rapturously taken up by the entire company: a mock marriage! There was no such thing, according to the Church, as marriage between a white man and a negress, and this made the situation even more exquisitely amusing.

There could be no harm in such a childish piece of fooling, thought Matthew, as the erstwhile languid company flashed into animation about him. He had proved the pleasure taken by the Cubanos in childish games and masquerades. He laughed and stood up; his legs were not quite steady, for, like the rest, he had taken much wine. He was a little put out when Clark, with a hand on his shoulder, pushed him roughly aside.

"You're not going to take part in this mountebankry?"

"Why not? You took part yourself in the charades we acted the other night."

"This is quite another affair. Look here, Flood, take my advice. It's going to make a scandal and put you in bad odour with every Catholic on the island."

"To hell with your advice," said Matthew, not, however, ill-temperedly. "You're not taking it seriously, are you? Good God, what's the harm in a bit of foolish play-acting?"

Clark jerked his thumb across his shoulder to where several of the men were trying to rouse a tipsy little priest and make him understand what was expected of him.

"Play-acting that includes the clergy won't make a favourable impression

in Havana. The Havanese may regard their private behaviour as their own affair, but they're critical when it touches their priests."

"Criticism doesn't seem to have much effect on that specimen!" retorted Matthew contemptuously.

"Don't be a fool, Flood; among the riff-raff that's here to-night you've got representatives of two of the greatest Catholic families on the island—the López and the de Corias—"

"Both of 'em drunk as owls!"

"Not too drunk to know what they're doing. Damnation, can't you see they're just trying to what lengths a heretic will go? And your conduct will be used as anti-British propaganda wherever there's a centre of disaffection in the island!"

"You are making a mountain out of a mole-hill!" said Matthew loudly. He thrust the other aside. He knew he was drunk, knew he would rather risk offending a few of the stiff-necked Havanese than earn himself the reputation of a prude or a spoilsport with his present company. Clark might describe them as riff-raff: they included also many friends of Estebán Rodríguez—he did not pause to consider what the sober and correct young man of the Barbados encounter would make of this horseplay—and several with whom he had already established contacts that would advantage him when it came to the disposal of the cargo from West Africa. It seemed that these were in no way behind-hand in joining the demand for a mock marriage, and he was not in a mood to believe Clark's warning that their motives were malicious.

Meanwhile the women had swept Sheba from her couch and, chattering like an aviary of birds, were tiring her for the ceremony. The girl Linda, limping, sullen, one shoulder hunched towards her ear, was pushed about, ordered to fetch this and that. She whined when they touched her, for her shoulder was still sore from the crop that Sheba had wielded with such dire results.

The gown into which they put her was her favourite—of gold-shot orange trimmed with bows of cerise, from which her head and shoulders rose like smoke from a volcano whose flames were the paradise plumes thrust in her crisped hair. She had, heaven knows, sufficient jewels of her own, but the excited girls stripped themselves to add to her glory: diamonds, rubies, monstrosities of filigree plastered her corsage, flung drops of fire into golden valleys and dripped from her stiffened arms. But for the rolling eyes, the flashing teeth, she might have been a josh-house image—so remote was her appearance from civilization, when they led her down to meet her waiting groom.

Matthew was loudly chaffed—one of Lord Albemarle's officers vaunting his claim, as a fellow-countryman, to act as groomsman. Clark had withdrawn, and stood, mute with disgust, against the farther wall. Loyalty to one whom he had begun to regard as a friend prevented his withdrawing altogether, but he could not bring himself, as several of his less particular—or less sober—colleagues had done, to lend his countenance to that which he regarded as a piece of criminal folly.

The little pimple-faced priest was propped up against the improvised altar; he apparently had no qualms about entering into the sacrilegious jest.

"*Musica, musica!*" voices were crying; some inventive spirit had the inspiration of ringing all the bells in the house, and the bridal procession formed

itself, the girls rebuking their partners—who sought to spoil the solemnity of the occasion by provoking them to laughter—with slaps and frowns.

Someone slipped a gold circlet from the finger of the “bridegroom,” and chose the appropriate moment for forcing it over the knuckles of the “bride”; when a great burst of applause signified that the ceremony was concluded to the satisfaction of all parties. The priest’s bibulous homily to the “married” couple was drowned in toast-drinking, and in facetious advice to the beaming bride.

She who had shrunk from becoming “Mrs. Montcalm” was now “Mrs. Flood”—a title which Gold Coast society would have conceded her for the past three months; she supposed that these final ceremonies were necessary to seal her title. She smiled, held her head high, and took the licentious jesting as though it were compliments.

It was left for Clark to observe that the smiles which wreathed the faces of the company were not all of them pleasant; that glances were exchanged that betrayed their owners’ uneasiness or disapproval, and he guessed at the reaction which would have set in before the morrow. Around the table a few dare-devil were preparing a monstrous, blotted document which the groomsmen announced to his principal were “the marriage lines,” to which were appended some unsteady signatures. Clark remembered this afterwards, with a twinge of unease, but the preposterous invention had vanished. He cursed the gossip which would spread inevitably to the fort, and wondered what effect this unseemly escapade would have on the remainder of Matthew’s stay in Havana.

The orgy reached its height in the ceremonial conduct of the “wedded” pair to the bridal chamber—after which the guests were left to amuse themselves as they pleased. The sun was up before the coaches, with blinds drawn upon the dishevelment and fatigue of their occupants, started to rumble through the awakening streets, and the House of the Negress was as the house of the dead; curtains thick as walls shut out the blessed day from the couch where the lovers lay, indifferent even to each other, in the aftermath of their rapture.

CHAPTER XIII

I

On the following day Matthew resolved and acted upon a stroke of diplomacy which he thought might effectively draw the sting of any gossip that might be flying about before nightfall. Ordering a groom to attend him, he paid formal calls on several of the commercial potentates to whom he had His Excellency's introduction, and in each case was agreeably surprised by the cordiality of his reception. On his part he took pains to create a good impression, and, although business was not mentioned, knew he had paved the way for future negotiations. As an owner, representing his own interests, he had an advantage of which he was determined to make the most; and as a gentleman he was allowed to see that it was more agreeable to deal with such than with the rough-spun captains, whose methods offended the creole sense of formality no less than they roused creole cupidity.

Having concluded his visits he rode to Clark's lodging, where, to his surprise, he found the doors guarded by military and was refused admission. He was informed, however, that Clark was up at the fort, and curiosity took him there in search of his friend, whom he discovered in a room hardly larger than a cupboard, filled with a table, a trundle bed and a welter of papers, half-packed valises and scattered personal belongings.

Whatever were his sentiments about the previous night's carousal, it was evident they were crowded from the forefront of his mind by more recent matter. His hair rubbed into disorder, his good-humoured face streaming with sweat, he made a futile effort to clear a spot for Matthew to sit in.

"You went to the lodgings? They're taken over as a hospital annex since six this morning—outbreak of fever and half the garrison down already—everything at sixes and sevens. Shut that door." As Matthew pushed the heavy door with his foot and the latch snapped into place, Clark looked at him with an expression of vexation and anxiety on his usually tranquil features. "It's as I said; Albemarle's going and Keppel's taking over. But keep it to yourself; there's no public announcement yet."

"How does that affect you?" Matthew drew his coat tails aside to sit on the broad, dusty window-sill, whose outer edge was worn by the scraping of bullocks' horns as they lurched along the street.

"I'm asking for a transfer. As a matter of fact, I want to go home. To be married."

"Why not make the passage in my ship?—if you've got the stomach for a slaver!"

"I doubt if my papers will go through in time; it may be Christmas before I hear."

"And is the lady waiting for you?" The note of cynicism drew a straight look from Clark's small, honest eyes.

"I may be a fool to count on it; she has waited four years."

"By God, you're an optimist! . . . Can you dine me to-night, Clark?"

"I can get you a place at the secretaries' table," said Clark, too much astonished to conceal his surprise.

"That will do admirably," Matthew burst out laughing at the other's expression. "This is the beginning of the new order, my friend! The casa Rodriguez is no longer open house to the light-headed gentry of Havana."

"That's something to the good," returned Clark dryly.

Matthew crossed his legs and uncrossed them impatiently.

"I'm not here in Cuba to fritter my time. I'm come, by the way, to engage your services as interpreter for to-morrow. Juan-María Cascados and his friend Ruiz are taking *almuerzo* with me—that's to say, unless they hear anything in the meanwhile to make them change their minds."

Clark grinned.

"Did you ever hear of a Spaniard changing his mind when it came to the acceptance of hospitality? So you've got in with old Cascados? That, I take it, is His Excellency's doing."

"He's got the land I want for my warehouses; it seems they've all been after him, but he won't sell. What will you wager I help him to change his mind?"

In this thrusting, energetic being Clark sought in vain the sodden sensualist of the previous night. To his sober, somewhat narrow and keenly responsible mind it seemed inexplicable that there could be in one human being so curious a combination of wisdom and folly. He felt, as all who knew Matthew felt, in greater or lesser degree according to the depth of their knowledge, this strange division of character like a shade across the other's path. Yet how far from shadow was now this brown, smiling face, shining as though aureoled with its fortune, and full of the confidence of youth!

Clark was not the first who, from the wholesome narrowness of his small, circumscribed existence, paid the tribute of a passing envy to one who had indeed inherited the kingdoms of the earth.

II

"Nobody don' come fo' suppuh! No mo' dance, no mo' music—clap-hands—dress-up!"

"You should learn to play cards; I have friends each night to dine."

"Don' wanna play cah'ds," she pouted. "Cah'ds fo' ole women—fo' ole men. Why yo' don' take me visit yo' friends in de town? Why yo' don' take me to de t'eatre?"

"I took you to the theatre last week."

Resentfully she plagued him to take her here and take her there; to a society wedding, of which she had heard the servants gossiping, to the water gala that was one of His Excellency's farewell hospitalities, or merely to ride in the town, where she had begun to annoy him with her transparent bids for public attention—which flagged since the novelty of her presence wore off. The only way of keeping her in a good temper was by loading her with presents—and these she would often destroy in her outbursts of petulance.

It seemed that, having reached a certain point, she was incapable of

assimilating any further instruction he tried to give her: that she even resented it, showing insolence and defiance at the least correction. Indeed, there were times when her behaviour showed a positive retrogression, and she seemed to take pleasure in evincing all those defects of character which he had striven to eradicate. Only her dominion over his flesh seemed unchanged, unchangeable; their limbs entwined, he could remember nothing but the magic such contacts evoked.

Who could tell what went on under that close, woolly skull in the long hours of loneliness that left her unoccupied? Not Matthew, for he was not the type to sense the mysteries of a woman's mind. What did she think? Who ever had heard of a negress thinking! Their thoughts were an animal's thoughts—of heat and cold, of hunger and thirst, of sleep and waking: that is how Matthew would have responded if he had been asked to give his views on his mistress's thoughts. And if, occasionally, he had misgivings, he set them aside. It would not have done, it would have brought an uncomfortable element into their relationship, if he had admitted, even to himself, a cerebral quickening, the struggling development of an independent entity, in this creature he kept solely for his pleasure.

Had she had a vocabulary, even had she not been strangled by her emotions, for which there seemed to be no outlet save through her rebellions, Sheba could have told him that the soul of an African girl is not the soul of a dog. Lacking altogether the power of mental correlation, her instincts knitted themselves nevertheless into a curiously distinct web of perception about the only two things that interested her: Matthew. Herself.

She loved him; and into her love had crept, gradually, a raging dissatisfaction, knowing that while he was her whole life, she was very far from being the whole of his. At first, it was her blackness that held him apart from her, and that made her humble; then she came to realize it was something more than her blackness, and her pride soared. It was through him that she had come to full knowledge of her womanhood, and her womanhood was the source of her pride. And she felt in Matthew's attitude to her the violation of her woman-pride, that fought against this arrogant disposal of her destiny.

She was his wife, and, apart from providing him with solace in his bed, she performed none of the functions of wifehood, as it was understood among her people. She neither bore children, nor cooked, nor cleaned for him: with the two latter she was forbidden to concern herself, the former had not, apparently, entered his mind. She was a ripe woman, and he made a toy of her; the knowledge brought a streak of bitterness even into their ecstasies; it struck at the roots of her dignity, and made one half of her resentful, while the other half was most loving.

This dumb dissatisfaction broke out in tiresomenesses which annoyed him, who should have found them pitiful. The need to assert herself was always there, like a burr under her consciousness, and, since Matthew would have none of it, it found its inevitable outlet upon her dependent, upon Linda.

Her sickness of mind seemed as though it had its effect upon her body. She had started, in those days, to feel miserable in her body. Miserable, puzzled, she tried wildly to cast her mind back to the days of her childhood: what had her mother done for the women when they were ill? For an hour or two, after a bout of sickness, she had a mad terror that she might be going to die;

she ran, yelling her terror, to Matthew, who, preoccupied with other business, dealt with her roughly, told her she had over-eaten—and, with his eyes averted to the bills over which he was poring, did not see the slow resurgence of African pride, or the way her head and breasts lifted, as she went out from his presence, an outraged princess. It was something more than over-eating; as she pressed her hands over her belly, it came to her slowly, incredulously, what it might be. . . .

There came a day when she was not there to welcome him when he came in.

"Where is the señora?" asked Matthew, in the Spanish of which he was starting to acquire a few serviceable phrases.

The girl Linda told him, twisting her lizard-like body and avoiding his eyes, that Sheba was upstairs.

"*No está bien, la señora.*"

It flashed into Matthew's mind that Sheba might have succumbed to the fever, which by now was raging throughout the town. He was about to mount to her chamber, when the negress clutched his sleeve; her bright, deceptive eyes glittered into his with some inexplicable emotion that he was at a loss to understand; but there was no mistaking the malice that hissed on her lips, while an explanatory gesture revealed to him the meaning of her words.

"*Está embarazada!*"

. . . He felt the earth rock under his feet. With a movement of whose violence he was unaware, he flung the girl from him; she fell back against the wall, and cowered there, licking her lips; but there was triumph, rather than fear, in the flickering of her eyelids.

It was beyond belief that he should never once have thought of this possible outcome of their passion—which, from the beginning, had placed itself on such a plane of surreality, so fantastically apart from any amour he had previously indulged, that he had never dreamed of consequences that would drag it down to the level of a sordid intrigue.

When he entered her room, Sheba was sleeping, and as he dragged back the curtains to let in the glaring light, it seemed that, with her hair disordered, her relaxed features faintly filmed with sweat had lost some of their fineness—of which he now wondered if it had existed only in his imagination. She looked—his conscience shrank from the recognition—like one of Black Jack-anna's girls: lying in her crumpled sheets, that smelt always of her body, an odour as suddenly and sharply repellent to Matthew as the first time he had experienced it in the Llandoger Trow. She was any negro slut; no longer the dark enchantress, the sable Venus of his passion.

III

"I've been waiting the better part of an hour; you might have let me know if you've changed your mind."

"Why should you wait? I expected you to go on, as I did not arrive."

They eyed each other short-temperedly; then Clark tossed his wig on the couch and sat down, loosening the bullion-crusted collar of his levée jacket.

"I can offer you little in the way of entertainment. I'm poor company to-night, and unless you're in the mood to be bored by my ill-humour, I recommend you to seek other society."

"So far as that goes, I've got no choice. I'm supposed to be in attendance at this moment," grunted Clark, narrowing his eyes as though they hurt him. "Twelve hours on end of pen-pushing, and now this infernal reception! Not to put too fine a point on it, I'd work enough to get you your invitation; it's to your advantage to put in an appearance, if only for an hour."

"I'm obliged for your efforts on my behalf. I tell you, I'm not in the vein for ceremonies."

"What's amiss?"

Matthew lolled in his chair; the glass, held awry, dripped wine on his knee. Squinting down at the stain, he started to chuckle.

"If you would know, I am about to become a father."

"Ay?" Clark appeared unmoved. His calmness shook the other.

"Ay; to a pot-bellied piccanin—like those blackamoors that swarm along the water-front."

"Well . . . you ain't the first." There was perhaps a little too much of deliberation in the reply. Matthew's fist came down heavily on the table.

"Nay; but this brat is *my* first. What do you say to that?"

The implication did not seem to strike his companion, who lifted his shoulders in a shrug—that ended as a shiver. Clark filled his glass, making no reply.

"What, in my place, would you feel about it?"

Clark rubbed his hand across his short, sparse hair.

"I'm not a man of much imagination . . . and, to tell the truth, I've never been drawn towards coloured wenches. Not that that's a virtue; it just so happens I'm not built that way. Here it's just a matter of local custom, and nobody I know of, whether Spanish or English, seems to make heavy weather of a half-breed family."

"Or of the women who provide them. Mine's a different situation."

"Yes; I see yours is different," was the uneasy answer.

"What am I to do with her? I can't turn her out, in a strange town, to make the best of a civilization of which, thanks to me, she knows nothing but its most luxurious aspects. She's not even got the language to help her along, and her own dialect doesn't serve with these Cuban blacks."

"Nay; that's surely a problem," admitted Clark. He seemed reluctant to enter into further discussion of a matter which, after all, did not concern him; glancing at the clock, he rose, using his hands to steady himself, as though the effort gave him pain. "I must be off, or I'll be in bad odour with my superiors."

"To hell with your superiors. Let me finish what I was saying. There's a ship leaves for England to-morrow." Matthew paused; his eyes, angry and ashamed, were on those of his companion. "That would be a solution, would it not?"

"You mean——?"

"To take a passage; to leave Abiathar Crown to finish my business here; to show a clean pair of heels to this damnable coil into which I've got myself." He laughed, but there were beads of sweat along the dark line of his hair. "It's the best solution, isn't it?"

"It may be . . . if you take the matter as seriously as your words suggest," Clark answered stiffly.

"A liaison with a black woman; another half-breed brat to scuffle in the dust—who in his right mind gives a second thought to it? That's the general point of view, isn't it? It's reasonable, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. And this happens, by a diabolical chance, to be the hundredth case. You've seen the woman, my mistress: what in God's name has she in common with the Havanese sluts? How could I leave a creature like that unprovided for—even if she were not carrying my child?"

"Something can surely be done about that. After all, what have you got to gain by staying? You have completed your business; there's nothing your agent can't deal with, now you've cleared the way."

"Nothing; including my woman," said Matthew bitterly.

"So far as that's concerned—it had to come; for I take it you weren't proposing to take her back with you to England?"

His blank stare was sufficient proof how little thought Matthew had given to this aspect of the future.

"I proposed . . . God knows what I proposed. Nothing was planned—all seemed to drift—to happen—like things happen in a dream. I've been living two lives: one the real and actual life that had to do with my material prospects and the indulgence of my ambitions; the other, a sort of dream—that one enjoys under the influence of a drug. I wanted. I took. That's the whole thing . . . yet it is not quite the whole: for I still want. I want what I have destroyed, and I loathe the effects of my destruction. God, I do loathe it."

"Come, Flood, pull yourself together." The conventional army-trained soul of the other man shrank in embarrassment from this burst of emotion. "You are best out of here as soon as may be, and my advice is, sail to-morrow and leave your agent and me to fix matters when you are gone. You can leave some provision for your woman, and I will charge myself with the responsibility of seeing it is properly bestowed, and that she finds some decent asylum with her own kind. I don't doubt she'll be unhappy for a while, and mourn your going; but it is merciful for these creatures they are as short-memoried as animals."

"I had a dog that died of grief when I gave it away."

Clark turned aside in disgust.

"With no desire to wound your self-esteem, I am bound to remind you that so attractive a creature is not likely, in these parts, to remain long without a protector!"

"I've not overlooked that fact." Matthew's lips twisted into a wry smile. "And it wounds me less than you might assume. It may, to you, be an indecency to confess that I have loved a black woman: I have, in truth, loved Sheba; but what I feel for her now is what you yourself might feel for a pregnant bitch that depends on you for comfort and reassurance in its helpless condition. I am all pity, all commiseration for the poor thing whose state revolts me; and I could no more follow my first instinct, and your advice, to rid myself of this embarrassment than I could leave a faithful animal to litter on a dung-heap."

"In that case, there is nothing to discuss."

"There is everything to discuss. Sit down."

"You know I am due at the fort!"

"Send a message; one of the servants will take it. I've made no claims on

our friendship so far, Clark! But if you pretend to anything more than common acquaintance with me, you'll stay and talk this out. It may be our last opportunity."

"Then you think of going?"

"I do not know what I think."

All day there had been an aching in Clark's bones; his throat felt raw, and food would hardly be forced past his aching gullet. Pain stabbed behind his eyes and ran round his head like a band of flexible steel, contracting and expanding; he knew he was in no physical state to endure the rigours of a Residential ceremony: the hours of standing, of exchanging diplomatic small-talk—alert always to catch His Excellency's eye: of deputizing for a depleted staff and anticipating the requirements of testy seniors, touchy on matters of precedence.

He scribbled a note, and Matthew summoned a servant. Clark closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair to wait for the resumption of their conversation.

"Is the child never white?" The sudden question startled him from his relaxed posture.

"On—that there are diverse opinions," Clark stammered. "I've heard it said that when the male is coloured and the female white, the children invariably follow the father's colouring; when the cases are reversed—you know the Gómez family?"

"I know Carlos and his sisters."

"There's a young half-sister who is hardly darker than Señorita Mercédes; but she was the tenth child of that particular union, and the first two, although mulatto, would pass anywhere for full-blooded negroes."

"My son—a negro. . . ."

"Can't you see—it might be better that way? After all, in Cuba, there's a life for such beings——"

"What sort of a life?"

"According to their lights, it ain't a bad one. The plantations solve the problem of maintenance; the males go, as a matter of course, to labour in the canes; the females are absorbed into the households. It's not uncommon for a wealthy planter—such, for instance, as de Lorcha of Buenaventura—to employ as many as eighty domestic slaves, among whom, recognized or not, are a number of his progeny. They get nothing in the way of preferential treatment, but it's the fashion, at least among the better class of planters, to treat household slaves well."

"Can you conceive any child with my blood in its veins becoming a plantation slave, or scouring floors in a creole kitchen?"

"What other solution is there?"

"God knows; but I must find one," said Matthew.

IV

Sheba's pregnancy was not going as it should. He first knew it when she turned her head away from a basket of sweetmeats he brought her—she who would ordinarily have gobbled the lot in less than an hour. During dinner

she ate nothing, but whined continually for water. Instead of one of her fine new gowns, she wore the crumpled cotton wrapper in which she had got out of bed, and though she bunched it about herself with a pathetic if belated effort at modesty, the altered lines of her body were painfully visible.

He had always heard that negresses littered as easily as bitches; it was therefore disconcerting to find her evincing all the symptoms of a civilized pregnancy. At night she was so restless in bed that he had to leave her; the relief of sleeping alone was so exquisite that it was usually long before he lost consciousness, and, lying between waking and sleeping, the past flowed in on him—the lovely, regrettable past that, by its very beauty, had destroyed the balance of his whole existence.

The simplest, most innocent details came back to him on a rush of memory: the brown *mouche* at the corner of Pallas's eyebrow, the tranquil movements of her hands when she retied the ribbon loops at her waist or pinned back a straying curl; the laughter that lowered her eyelids, the gravity that opened them so wide that every mystery of the universe seemed to float in those pellucid lakes of clear sea-blue; the modest reticence of her behaviour and her lovely, clean simplicity of a country-reared girl, which, with the delicate manners a duchess might have envied, lent her a dignity as unconscious as it was compelling to her admirers. Her sweet levity, her gentle, sober thoughtfulness. . .

He longed, as he had never longed, to lay his dishonoured head in the softness of that warm bosom, and, clutching her knees to pray her forgiveness and forgetfulness of all that was past. But he knew that for Pallas, as for himself, it could never be; that, dedicated to their separate paths, they must move for ever apart, seeking in other companionships solace for that woe which had crippled their hearts. Consciousness of the wastefulness of it almost broke his own.

Nor did Sheba sleep, save fitfully, during those *nuits blanches*, when loneliness pressed to her side as the child pressed in her womb. She had known a moment of radiance, her moment of annunciation; she had soared to immortal womanhood, her head among the tops of the cotton palms, her feet close-planted on the soil of her ancient forests, and all of the dark and shining shaft between was a quivering shaft of triumph. The mother of warriors rose to announce her pride to the man, her husband . . . when it came to her, through Matthew's terrible kindness, that, for her, it was not like that.

And then there came back to her other, frightening memories: of little dark man-children, not rolling sleek and fat as puppies in the clean, sandy earth about the huts, not cramming their fat little stomachs with the fresh meat of their fathers' killing, not swinging joyfully at their mothers' luscious breasts—but grovelling among the offal heaps of side streets, rubbing their sore eyes with little, brittle wrists, snivelling and bony and scared: as she had seen them in Havana. These were the children, her intelligence had told her, of chance couplings between whites and blacks: and, having once absorbed the thought, nothing of the luxury with which she was surrounded, no means taken by Matthew to show her that her situation was different from theirs, could give her back her lost sense of security.

The ordinary negress might have sunk into pits of self-abasement, would have grovelled; not so Sheba, daughter of a governing tribe. Secretly, darkly, in the recesses of her soul, she fought against the onward movement of her

destiny: fighting, not only for herself, but for her child. She sought unceasingly for some means of self-assertion which should place her beyond the power of the fate whose movement she suspected in the actions of every one about her.

"Señor—señor! Es mi ama lo ha hecho—eso—con las tijeras!"

He could not make out the bastard Spanish, but the face that hung over his pillow seemed, in the first confusion of waking, so implicit with diabolism that he felt his blood freeze. It was as though he were frozen awake. Then the face changed, was pitiful, blubbering, filled with a senseless terror. From the uncovered shoulder of the negro girl ran trickles of scarlet that her shaking fingers had daubed horribly across her mouth.

He leapt up and ran into Sheba's room, where he found her crouching, hiding the bloody scissors, but unable to hide the spots of blood that spattered sheets and floor.

"What are you doing?" He shook her shoulder roughly.

"Dat Linda—bad girl—do bad t'ing to Sheba!"

"No hé hecho nada!"

He could understand Sheba's gabbling as little as he understood the negress's Spanish, but he noticed that her face was not black, but grey, as though chalk had been rubbed into it, and that her hands were burning.

He was very patient with her; he forced her back into bed, he brought her water and held the cup when she drank. All the time he was saying to himself, "This is the mother of my child." It was the only way he could conquer the physical horror he had of contact with her dark, morbose flesh. The advance of her sickness was evident; she was suffering in the inarticulate way an animal suffers, unable to explain the apparent fear and pain that governed her.

He had obviously got to find her a doctor, and the one person who could have helped him, Clark, had that day been taken to hospital with the fever. He knew none but the army surgeons, whose solicitude he distrusted. The practice of medicine, he had heard, lay mainly in the hands of the priests, and he was as little anxious to admit any of that fraternity across his threshold.

So several days went by, and one day he knew he must get help or let her die. She had swung between alternate phases of delirium and stupor after a night when she had done little but vomit and scream with terror. He sent Linda with a note to one of the surgeons, and it seemed, as the girl took it out of his hands, as though a look of mockery and cunning slid like a snake behind her eyes, instantly to be replaced by the correct and humble demeanour proper to her station.

The surgeon came, glanced casually at Sheba, prescribed a purge, claimed his fee and hurried away. He had enough on his hands without wasting time on someone's black woman.

She was a little better after the purge, but it left her pitifully weak. It left her with something worse. In those pre-antiseptic days infection was spread as often by attendant doctors as by those who suffered from the disease. She started a fever that manifested itself in the skin eruption common to the negroes, and exhausted herself in tearing at her itching flesh. All the gloss was gone from her skin, that was as dry as powder; her bones stared through the flesh like the skeleton of a starving dog; she refused to eat or drink.

Would it be better to let her die? Matthew faced the problem, and because he knew that in the deepest, most shameful recesses of his heart it was what he most desired, he felt constrained to struggle for her life: at least, for that life that moved within her. Her poor, deformed body was to him the most frightful reproach, and the memory of Pleydell's words twisted, at such moments, like a dagger in his heart.

It was not easy to get Don Pablo Jiménez to visit a heretic, but, as a member of the Benedictine order, his attitude to the negroes was one of sympathy and understanding, and if Sheba were to permit herself to be baptised, there was no doubt he would take a particular interest in her case. Sheba was too ill to be consulted, even had her intelligence risen to the question involved. Don Pablo was sent for—simply to baptise a sick negress; and less than an hour after the message went forth, a short, stout priest arrived, and removed at least part of the embarrassment of the situation by announcing that he understood English.

"... Though not speak very well! I was in Roman college, with students of many nation. I use my time to learn as much foreign idioma as possible: English, French, German. And I keep up by reading foreign literature. You have superb literature, señor! Your Shakespeare, your Dryden, your Johnson—it is fine for a country to have grand tradition in literature, as we Spaniards, with our Cervantes, our Lope de Vega——"

His tact, his suave acceptance of the delicacies of the position, set Matthew at ease. It struck him that here was a man who could advise him, and whose advice he would be prepared to accept. Don Pablo was a chapetone, born in Sevilla, whence his parents had migrated, in his childhood, to live in Italy. He asked a few brief questions, and, once in Sheba's chamber, shed his priestly benevolence and became so coldly and completely the man of science that Matthew was startled. She was in a state of stupor when they entered, breathing stertorously.

Don Pablo briskly deposited the little leather case that contained the holy oils on a chest before approaching the bed. Awkwardly uncertain of correct procedure, Matthew inquired:

"Do you wish me to be present during the ceremony, father?" He found himself saying "father," though he had never in his life addressed a priest in those terms.

"Ceremony? Ah, *el bautismo*. I would rather," said Don Pablo, while his little eyes roved over his patient and beyond, taking in every detail of the surroundings, "that this poor soul were in a state to know of, if not to understand, the holy sacrament before . . . How long has this gone on?" he interrupted himself to ask.

Matthew answered as best he could; it was evident from the priest's manner that he did not regard Sheba in imminent danger of death, and this sent a double pang, of grief and of disappointment, through Matthew's heart.

Don Pablo was looking at him closely; he felt the blood beat up his cheeks, as though the priest could read every ignoble process of his mind. Then Don Pablo looked away; there was a curious uneasiness, mingled with anger, and—thought Matthew—resentment in his manner.

He took the sick girl's hand, scrutinized her pillow, pushed up her eyelids to observe the whites of the eyes, and to Matthew's surprise, turned back and

examined, inch by inch, the coverings of her bed. A short, almost grotesque figure in his monkish habit, he trotted round to the farther side of the couch on which Sheba lay, shook the bed curtains, tweaked up the counterpane to look under the bed, stared at the floor, at the wall, without finding, apparently, that which he sought.

Suddenly he bent, and with a movement as swift as it was unexpected, jerked the pillow from under Sheba's head.

"*Santísimo Jesús!*"

He swooped and picked up something that had fluttered to the ground. Matthew looked down, uncomprehending, at what the priest held out to him—a small, snowy tuft whose shape he recognized.

"A white cock's feather?"

"It is as I thought."

"I don't understand, father," faltered Matthew.

"Obeah," was the solemn reply.

VI

"Voodoo and obeah are not the same," Don Pablo was explaining. "Obeah is a ritual incantation, performed by native 'priests,' for the purpose of projecting the evil spirit—the Obeah itself—into the bodies of their victims. Poison is sometimes used; but the true power of obeah is the hypnotic influence it exerts over its subjects: an influence which, as you know, it is easy to impose on ignorant and credulous people. Victims of obeah die more often of fright, than of poisoning; that, in my opinion, is what is happening upstairs."

"You gave her a draught——"

"If poison has been administered, vomiting and purging will dispose of it; the fever is a local distemper that the negroes take lightly. But knowing, or suspecting, herself to be under the influence of obeah, your—servant"—Don Pablo's eyes were lowered discreetly—"is sinking into a decline."

"Is there nothing to be done?"

"If I can, by opposing the hypnotism of the Church to the hypnotism of a diabolical cult, persuade her to believe in the power of the Holy Cross as she now believes in the power of obeah, it is possible—I will go no further than to say it is possible—her life may be saved."

That curious sensation, of a cold hand reaching out to lay itself upon his fevered life, that had disturbed him once before—he could not remember when or why—came over Matthew. He felt an inward shrinking, but sat very still.

"And now," said Don Pablo, rising briskly, "I will, with your permission, señor, return to the upper chamber, where I will wait until this trance passes. Do not trouble to accompany me. I may, in fact, see fit to conceal myself, the better to observe anything that passes."

"Save for myself and the negress who waits on her, no one has access to the room," muttered Matthew.

"The negress? Is she one of the Rodríguez servants?"

"No. The company I entertain has entailed some augmentation of the

household. The engagement of the new staff was left in the hands of Pedro, who seems to be the major domo."

"A loyal servant and a good Catholic," approved Don Pablo. "I will, if you permit me, see the negress."

Matthew rang the bell, and gave orders to the servant who answered it. Occasions came back to his memory—occasions which, at the time, he had indolently ignored: shrieks and cries for mercy from Sheba's apartments on the upper floor; the many times he had seen Linda's face blubbered with tears; a time when he mislaid one of his riding crops and found it thrust partly under the drapery of Sheba's bed, with dark stains upon the thong. When he questioned her, she said it was a dog who had wandered into the patio and leapt at her to bite her. He had known she was lying, and would not be troubled to arrive at the truth. Now she was paying the price of his negligence. He knew it was as foolish to blame her as it would be to blame a child too young to know the brutality of its behaviour.

They came back, to tell him that Linda was not to be found.

CHAPTER XIV

I

THE Abbess of the Convent of Santa Clara was a woman of much worldly experience, of intelligence uncommon to women of her race and of great self will. She defied convent rule to the extent of being waited on by a negress; her finely shaped, predatory hands bore rings whose value made mock of the humility of her order. The deep blue habit which, in her case, was made of the finest woven cloth, clothed her large, self-indulgent body with dignity—even with an effect of luxury; as though that body, nourished on the richest dishes, the best of wines that the convent could supply, communicated its richness to the majestic folds.

Daughter of a wealthy and famous chapetone family, well known in the diplomatic services, she had travelled much, before a thwarted love affair took her into the convent. At sixty, having outlived the awe of her novitiate, she chuckled over the memories of her unregenerate past; the tales she could tell over her wine to a select and discreet company outrivalled the Decameron, and, like Boccaccio, she never omitted to point the moral, but with an acid piquancy denied to the lesser artist.

Now she cared more, she declared frankly, for the pleasures of the table than for the wearing delights of love; but this did not prevent her having an eye of appreciation for a handsome priest, for a ruffling layman, for one or other of the hot-headed gallants who were for ever besieging the girls whose parents put them under her charge. If one of these tiresome young fellows was handsome enough, he was summoned to the Abbess's parlour to receive his scolding; otherwise he received a curt intimation through the gatehouse that unless he made himself scarce, the girl's family would be informed. In which case, the object of his devotions was apt to receive the sour and scornful looks of one who had never, in her hey-day, so much as acknowledged the existence of any but the most presentable and dazzling of her many admirers.

Notwithstanding the light and frivolous side of her character, of which all who knew her well were aware, the Abbess was held in great veneration by her religious associates, and by those under her charge. No woman in her position could produce a more imposing dignity, a more formidable coldness with those who incurred her displeasure. She was a dragon for the formalities, and her discipline was as harsh as it was unexpected. She was a tremendous supporter of the diplomatic and political power of the Church, and, while having her own way when it pleased her, was implacable to the slightest departure from its rules in other persons. She was as hard as nails, practical to her fingertips, and mistress of every form of coercion necessary to the gaining of her own, or the Church's, ends.

She looked with curiosity on the young man who sat before her. He was a heretic, and she would have said she hated heretics; but he was also the handsomest creature she had set eyes on for months. Nevertheless, she was standing for no nonsense; she was not there to be used by any one—least of

all by a heretic. The slow, uncertain, English phrases that she had not used since she was a girl at the court of St. James dropped from her lips; she scowled, recognizing the faultiness of her own pronunciation.

"And this young woman; you say you wish to provide for her?"

"I wish, madam—señora——" stammered Matthew, wishing himself a thousand miles away; the air of the convent, in particular of the Abbess's parlour, crowded with religious bibelots and not devoid of more secular decoration (there was a fresco which, from its shadowed corner, piqued and defied his curiosity) stifled him. "I wish to secure for her nursing and medical attention, until her child is born."

"You are not a Catholic; is she?"

Startled by the question, Matthew recalled with relief the crucifix which, since Don Pablo's visit, had been installed at the head of Sheba's bed.

"She has recently been baptised." He hoped this answer would suffice. He felt the Abbess's small, shrewd eyes fixed on his own.

"And she continues as your mistress?"

"As she is a stranger to the island, she continues, for the present, under my protection." He had flushed hotly at the impudence of the question. The Abbess suppressed a smile.

"Are you prepared to pay for the attention she receives—or is that responsibility hers?"

"I, naturally, am responsible."

Looking across his shoulders to the patio, where two gardeners were clearing the fountain of its summer accumulation of weed, the Abbess rubbed her nose; slowly she lifted her hand to scratch her cheek, which was red with a form of erysipelas that tormented her when she took too much wine. It was an odd face: more that of a man than a woman, with its strongly marked, fleshy features, its pouting mouth and voluptuous double chin.

"I think you have not yet told me all, señor," she observed reflectively.

"Has not Don Pablo done so already?" he flung at her, impatient of such evasions.

Her eyes became hard as stones.

"I am not here to answer questions, but to ask them."

"Then ask them, madam, and I will answer to the best of my ability," he snapped.

This time she smiled openly. She never thought worse of a man for showing spirit.

"*Bueno*. What is your occupation, Don Mateo?"

"Since the death of my grandfather, Hercules Flood, I am of independent means. I have, however, active interests in shipping and in the slave trade."

"Allow me to felicitate you, señor; those are remunerative—diversions."

Matthew thought: "So that's the way the wind blows? I'm to pay through the nose for the privilege of inheriting Grandfather's money!" He was amused, rather than offended, by these signs of the Catholic Church living up to its reputation, and smiled impudently at the Abbess, awaiting her further questions. At last—

"And this young person in whom you interest yourself: it is perhaps some young lady from—Jamaica?"

Matthew pressed his lips together; he knew now that she was stringing

him. The Abbess picked up a fan and began to use it, as though their conversation were only of the most casual interest.

"As Don Pablo has already informed you, ma'am," he said crisply, "she is a negress from Fort Charles."

The fan dropped gently, and the Abbess laughed.

"*Excusa, señor!* We have evidently been talking at"—she paused, frowned, snapped her fingers and captured the word from the void of memory—"cross purposes! I actually thought you wished to enter her in my hospital."

He sat aghast at her duplicity. The Abbess wagged her head and rocked quietly with her chuckles.

"*Qué absurdo! Excusa—mal entiendo—*" She wheezed as though overcome by the simple jest.

"I know no Spanish, señora," retorted Matthew, "and for that reason I asked Don Pablo to approach you in advance of this visit, that you might be prepared with your decision, for which I am now waiting."

"My decision—on what?"

"I wish the girl Sheba to be admitted to your hospital, so that she may have the benefit of your nuns' skill, and also be protected from certain influences which, according to Don Pablo, we have reason to fear."

The fan cracked as crisply as a pistol shot.

"There is no decision to give, señor. Quite simply, the laws of the convent do not permit the admission of coloured or half-caste women." She rose, as though the conversation were finished, and, lumbering across the room, laid her hand on the bell rope that hung beside the door. The fact that she did not instantly pull it reassured Matthew; it was a trick, a piece of convent play-acting! Rising, he faced her, looking down on the arrogant, stubborn face. Something—he never knew what: perhaps it was a looseness at the corner of a lip, a wanton twitch of the fingers—told him (he who had never, but once, failed in his estimates of her sex) that this one, though a nun, was also a woman.

"And have there been no occasions, señora, when you have found it—shall we say, expedient, to forget about the convent rules?"

She glowered at him; he wondered if he had gone too far.

"That is the speech of a heretic!"

"I am a heretic; but I am also a great admirer of the Catholic Church. Will you not be seated, and let me tell you why I admire your Church?"

She snorted impatiently; she did not move from her place by the door, but he knew she was listening.

"Madam, I am a man of business; there exists in the world no business concern that can equal the Catholic Church for making the most of opportunity. That, at least, is my opinion; do you take it on yourself to disillusion me?"

There was no play-acting in the look of scorn and malignance she now fastened upon him; but her rubicund colour had faded to a leaden purple, and her hand dropped from the bell rope. She walked slowly back to her chair, in which she sat, gripping its arms, while her voice trembled with an indignation that came less from herself than from some power behind and beyond her, that she was unable to control.

"You, a heretic, living in a state of mortal sin, dare to affront the Church whose favours you seek? You must be very young, señor; very stupid, and very ignorant."

"Pardon me, madam, if the colour of my compliments does not become the occasion on which I choose to pay them! I have paid the Church the highest compliment which, in my character as a commercial individual, it is in my power to pay. As for the seeking of favours—I ask nothing for myself; I only appeal on behalf of a poor creature who, as a Catholic, has a right to call on your benevolence."

"The negroes have no rights," came the answer, in a voice of iron. "By the infinite mercy of Holy Church they are allowed the blessing of baptism; the rest lies with themselves. Has she confessed? Has she received absolution?"

"What do you think such exercises would mean to her?"

"What does her relief mean to you?" riposted the old woman. "I will tell you, Don Mateo. A salving of your conscience; a shifting of the responsibility which you assumed when you took this woman from her proper environment; and, in time, forgetfulness of your sin."

That, *never*. But he held back the words, to say with a coldness that matched her own:

"For which benefits I am prepared to pay—generously."

"I see," said the Abbess, "that you are a man who thinks that money settles everything."

And you? His tongue was in his cheek. Her old eyes were exploring him, beneath her knitted brows.

"Why are you doing this?" she muttered. "It is not usual."

"I am not prejudiced by the usual, ma'am—any more than you," he put in cunningly. "Shall we leave it at this—that in my own eyes, as well as those of your Church, I have sinned, and am anxious to make what amends lie in my power?"

"There is no absolution for your sin outside the Church; why do you not enter it?" she asked him harshly.

"Because the matter of my sin rests with myself; I only do not choose that others should suffer for it."

"They are bound to suffer. The child will suffer," she reminded him.

"For the present the mother is suffering, and you deny her the comfort that the Church owes to its children."

"Once and for all, señor"—the hard, flat palm of her hand smote the carving of the chair-arm—"the Church owes *nothing* to those who do not conform fully to its rule."

Matthew sat silent. Yet, oddly enough, her very violence encouraged him. It was evident that she only sought some means of justifying her capitulation. The Church might not owe, but it could give. Or, rather, it could sell.

The Abbess, too, was silent, sunk into her heavy flesh, her chin resting on her clenched right hand. She was very powerful, and she knew it; but what he asked went beyond ordinary power. Even for her, with all her influence, her standing in her own order and with Rome, it would require some tremendous justification. . . .

The voice in which she spoke at last startled him with its depth, its curious,

warm earthiness—that should never, he told himself, have belonged to a nun!

“You must love her very deeply.” The words themselves held some strange, retrospective significance, as though the speaker had known in her time, and had not forgotten, the depth of human love.

He looked up quickly. She was frank; he could be equally so.

“You are mistaken, *señora*. If I loved her, I should not be resigning her into your hands.”

“You have not done so,” she came back on him quickly, “nor have I agreed to any such resignation. Understand me; this is not a matter in which I can act on my own authority. Nor”—she cleared her throat, and her voice rasped like his own—“are the Church’s dispensations to be lightly purchased.”

“So I had supposed,” was his dry response.

“*Vamos, señor!*—how much are you in earnest?” Again the imperious palm came down. “There is no point in discussing this at all unless you talk in facts, Don Mateo! You come asking an indulgence whose immensity it is evident you know nothing about: do you expect me to bargain with you?” Her thick lips pouted, again the choleric red mounted in her cheek.

With some relief at having at last reached the core of his errand, Matthew mentioned the sum that Don Pablo, reluctantly, and evidently with some annoyance at having his opinion consulted, had named as the minimum to be offered. The Abbess quickly lowered her eyes, and pinching her lower lip between thumb and forefinger, reflected. It was not bad, for a beginning; not sufficient, by a long way, but enough to prove the sobriety of the speaker’s intention. If he would pay that, he would pay more. She said at last:

“It is impossible for me to give you your answer to-day, *señor*. There are others who must be consulted; I could in no circumstances take such responsibility upon myself.”

“I am prepared to wait for your decision. You will remember, however, that the matter is pressing. The woman is very ill. I think,” said Matthew slowly, “that she may die.”

Their eyes met, with perfect understanding of that which lay in each other’s minds. “Is your convent so rich that you can afford to neglect this opportunity?” his taunted her. “And that would put an end to your troubles,” hers reminded him.

“Why do you not make arrangements for her to be cared for at home?” she frowned. “You are in the house, are you not, that young Estebán Rodríguez inherited from his grandmother, the marquesa de Fuenterabía? If Don Pablo is attending to the case, he can put you in the way of people who will do as well for the girl as anything she will get in my hospital.”

“There are two nuns there already,” Matthew told her. “It is, unfortunately, apparent that they can do little against the influences of which I spoke to you.”

“What influences? I remember no influences,” said the Abbess, with a flicker of curiosity.

“Obeah,” said Matthew shortly.

“Obeah?” She showed that she was startled. Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. “The punishment for obeah is burning. Bishop Morell was one of the most zealous of our prelates in the prosecution of the cult, and under his prelacy more than two hundred men and women, proved or sus-

pected, were brought to the stake. It is to be feared that, in procuring the Bishop's removal, your marqués of Albemarle did not take this sufficiently into account. So they have started it over again! What is it? Poison, or——?"

"Don Pablo says that victims of obeah die more often of fright than of poisoning."

She nodded.

"This must be looked into. If you care to call on me to-morrow, I may have my answer ready," she told him.

He rose; there was evidently nothing to be gained by further discussion. But there was yet something to be said.

"And the child?"

"The child——?" Once more her cunning eyes sought his.

"The child is mine, señora, and provision must be made for its future."

This time she was nonplussed. Never, in her long and varied experience, had she come across a parallel instance. The Church, looking askance upon such unions, encouraged the lightness with which they were habitually regarded; far from fostering the responsibilities they entailed, it penalized—none too heavily—those of its members who persisted in assuming them. The children of mixed unions, although admitted to the rites of baptism, were excluded from other benefits of the Catholic faith, not only on account of their mixed blood, but of illegitimacy. Slowly and not unsympathetically, she explained this to Matthew, watching the growth of resentment in his darkening face.

"In the case of a male child, it might be placed under the supervision of one of the parish priests; you can ask Don Pablo about that. As a member of the Benedictine order, he does much work among the negroes."

"But—God's blood!" cried Matthew, and forgot he was swearing before a religious. "This child is not a negro! He is begotten by me of a negress, but he has the blood of my forefathers in his veins!"

"Ay, Don Mateo!" There was an odd kindliness in the old eyes. "Have you thought how many of our island population could say the same? How the squandered and adulterated blood of Castile, of Estremadura, of Andalucía looks at you from every third pair of eyes you meet along the street? How the man who sweeps the dung and the boy who carries away the ordures might, if they chose, claim ancestry among the *grandes* of Spain? These things must be ignored, Don Mateo, for the sake of the *sangre antigua*; they must not be brought into the daylight, or acknowledged."

"What man has a right to ignore his own seed?"

"Then it is for him to see it is not wasted," she reminded him coldly.

"One thinks of these things afterwards," he muttered. Her eyes softened, her hand reached out and patted his, that lay clenched upon his thigh.

"It is something one thinks of them at all. It is a pity you are not a Catholic, *hijo*, for you might have made a good one! I will see what can be done; but it is going to cost you much. More than you have offered." She blinked at him, her dropping lower lip revealing the yellow line of her teeth.

"I am not a fool," he muttered.

An irresistible chuckle shook the volume of her draperies.

"I am not so sure, *hijo*—I am not so sure!"

II

It seems as though the finer the flower, the quicker its decay. . . . Too delicate to hold its own beauty.

The words were all too present in Matthew's memory, as he stood that night beside Sheba's bed, on either side of which tapers burned brightly. A nun, installed by Don Pablo, sat at its foot, reading her office; she neither looked up nor rose as Matthew entered, her lips continued to move silently above the pages of her missal.

Under the thin sheet of linen lay the limbs—once so beautiful and so desired—that had grown too weak to rebel against the shift which, for decency's sake, had been drawn over them; with nothing left of their one-time allure but a restless twitching, like that of a hound that hunts in its sleep. The thrown-back head was a thin, leaden mask that glistened with the drops of sweat that, slowly forming at the roots of the hair, rolled down over staring cheekbones to moisten the pillow.

The once supple outline had a clumsy thickness that reproached the man who stood looking down on it, seeing less the shape that had been his mistress, than the living casket of his unborn child. And it came to Matthew, in a terrible pang of compunction that, whatever children he might in future beget, perhaps in wedlock, this was his first-born, dispossessed by his own act of all that a first-born can claim as his right, within the man-made limits of the law.

Suddenly he saw that she was looking at him; her eyes were open, their dark luminosity filled almost the whole of the space between the lids, blotting out the milky blueness of the ball; and in them was an expression of strange wonder and worship. At the same time he felt her small, dry fingers groping for his, closing round them like the tendrils of a fading plant. Two words came from her, faintly as a breath—words which he had not taught her, that she must have learned from the servants.

"*Amo mio*"—my master. Then her head slipped once more towards her shoulder, she sighed, and appeared again to sleep.

"When he could speak, Matthew asked:

"Have they found the negress?"

The little Spanish nun lifted her head and shook it; she had very pale, innocent eyes.

"*No entiendo, señor.*"

When he repeated the question in her own language, she shook her head again.

"There are many places for wicked people to hide, in Havana."

Matthew cast an involuntary glance at the crucifix, and despite the scepticism on which he prided himself, felt a shiver run down his body. It seemed small, dead and helpless in the presence of an evil that lingered in the room—that hovered on the edges of the candlelight, unheeded by the little nun, who went on reading her office as calmly as though in the sanctuary of her cloister.

CHAPTER XV

I

THE Abbess plunged her long-handled silver spoon for the third time into the green coco-nut preserve for which, as for all sweet dishes, she had a passion, and made a mental note to get its recipe before leaving. The Santa Clara jam could not compare with it. She hoped the indigestion she had invited with clams, *rabi rubia* (the rich, highly-spiced fish that was counted a delicacy on the island), roast iguana and green paw-paw would hold off until she was home again, but she was powerless for her lust of the palate, and it was a pleasure to eat in the company of as great a connoisseur as she was herself.

Between their exchange of island scandal, she and her companion exchanged smiles of appreciation; Don Jeronimo Madariaga (irreverently known as Don Chombo by his seminarists) bent forward once more to brim the glass of his guest with the heavy brown wine the last flota had brought him from Cadiz.

Since the expulsion of the Bishop, Don Jeronimo was the chief representative in Havana of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Santiago, then the only cathedral city on the island; and it was on this account, as well as on the strength of their long friendship, that the Abbess had come to ask his advice on the delicate affairs of the heretic, Don Mateo Flood.

A typical Jesuit, Don Jeronimo was well aware of the queasiness of his position—not only upon the island but in his native country. Anti-Jesuit feeling in Portugal already ran so high that the Society had been dissolved and its members sent to France—a country Don Jeronimo detested. In Spain the same feeling was spreading, and although Carlos III was, so far, their supporter, his influence did not extend to the island, and would, in any case, be valueless if British rule were established. No one, therefore, was more anxious than Don Jeronimo to undermine British influence; his support of the rebels was, so far, suspected but not proven, and he was all the more eager to strike while the iron was hot the blow that should deliver Havana from its conquerors. He knew that there was no order more hated, more suspect by the British, than his own; and that it would be towards the Jesuits that their first measures would be directed in a drive against Catholic influence.

He knew that the Abbess was his sympathiser, and that her financial as well as her moral support might come in very usefully. He knew, above all, the value, at this critical moment in the island's history, of getting hold of as much private money as possible; since, if the Jesuits were expelled, their enormous holdings in Cuban land and property would be confiscated, and the source of their supplies, at any rate from the island, cut off.

He was therefore anxious to do a good turn to the Abbess, with a view to claiming her assistance later on; but the last dishes had been removed, the hot, bitter coffee placed on a table on the balcony, with its proper accompaniments of *turrón*—in deference to the Abbess's taste—and of cigars—to his own—before he laid the tips of his thin, pointed fingers together and gave his opinion on the subject which had engaged their desultory attention throughout the meal.

"The Church has always, as you know, left a certain amount of discretion in the hands of its higher officials, with a view to providing for circumstances that could hardly come within the prevision of those who made its rules."

The Abbess, her mouth full of *turrón*, paused to dislodge a large and gummy portion from a back tooth before replying.

"On the subject of negroes, however, its rules happen to be uncommonly specific. Come now, would *you* admit a slave to your seminary?"

Don Jeronimo smiled, with his head on one side.

"Fortunately, perhaps, the peculiarity of the negro mentality sets a boundary to that problem! You might as well ask 'would you admit an ass to your seminary?'—the brain of the negro and that of the ass being so similar, it is hardly worth the trouble of making distinction between them!"

"All the same—if there were question of advantage——?" The Abbess made an expressive and exclusively Spanish gesture with her fingers, that were sticky with the sweetmeats, before wiping them on a napkin of fine lawn.

"In that case," said Don Jeronimo, having still his head on one side, and the half-sly, half-innocent smile on his lips, "and having regard for the advantage—for it is always unwise to refuse something which may profit others besides oneself—I might argue something in this fashion: that since the ass is an innocent and blameless beast, as incapable of doing evil as it is of assimilating good, the example of the blessed Saint Francis——"

Tiring of this *jeu d'esprit*, the Abbess broke in.

"Come now, be serious. There is, of course, no rule of the Society that forbids the admission of asses; but we are talking of negroes. How does one get over a thing like that?"

"For my part, I should say it was a case for the exercise of personal discretion—and responsibility."

"Responsibility! What, for breaking rule? *Por dios*, Don Jeronimo, I am getting too old for penances!"

He leaned over and gave her hand a reassuring pat.

"A matter you can safely leave to your confessor—eh? Let me at least reassure you on one point: they are a great deal too disturbed at Santiago to pay attention for the present to the convents."

"Do I know not that?" She hunched her shoulders and pouted. "Have I written five times to say the roof of the oratory may fall in at any minute, after last season's rains?—that the paving in the north cloister is in so bad a state that my nuns do nothing but rick their ankles——?"

Don Jeronimo's eyes were twinkling at her.

"The disturbances will not last for ever; and think how you could strengthen your own position by procuring—for example—a handsome endowment for the house!"

It was exactly what she had wished him to say. She held her breath, nodding as he went on suavely.

"You were saying, too, that your accommodation was not equal to your numbers. A very gratifying state of affairs!—though undoubtedly it calls for an organization that wastes, perhaps, time and energy that might more profitably be directed towards spiritual matters."

She thrust out her lower lip.

"That was before the siege. There is room enough at present. But when

the scholars start to come back from the country—" Their eyes met. "Sister Maria Josefa is always pestering me for more privies!" she burst out.

"An admirable zeal for the health of her charges. But I warn you that the commissioners are not likely to look with favour on such requests for some time to come. Despite which, the care of Church property is a serious consideration which can hardly be neglected. If, by some fortunate chance, you were able to set these little matters in order, I think you would find that they would overlook—much!"

There was, she reflected, plenty to overlook. The accounts for the Abbess's private luxuries were, as usual, artfully separated and scattered among "new rafters for refectory ceiling," "repairing and re-gilding reredos," and "renewal of shutters on south-west frontage"; but there were various items (doubtless taken for granted by Don Jeronimo) that defied concealment. It was a bad moment to choose for extravagance, to which, unhappily, she was addicted.

"Then you would counsel me——?"

"Rather give *me* your counsel, my dear friend," hastily interrupted Don Jeronimo, who was not, if he knew it, going to be held responsible for anything. "I have looked forward to this conversation with you: for a matter has arisen, and been brought to my notice—which means, alas, that I cannot ignore it—that seems to affect my duty; and I should like your opinion before acting on the information I have received. Do you know anything of a priest called Vilchez?"

"A horrid little pimple-faced creature, smelling always of bad liquor?" The Abbess pulled a face of disgust. "He came once—about one of his parishioners, I remember. No, I know nothing of him; what have you heard?" The gusto for scandal sparkled in her eye.

The Jesuit leaned towards her and lowered his voice.

"The worst possible account. Briefly, that he is not a member of the priesthood, nor even a Catholic. That he is an English spy." He pounced upon her involuntary movement of horror. "You have spoken to him only the once?"

"The once—certainly; and it was over twelve months ago."

"You noticed—nothing?"

"I noticed," said the Abbess contemptuously, "that he spoke a villainous Spanish. At the time I took it for one of the country dialects—what the peasants speak is hardly intelligible to civilized people. Afterwards I wondered if the accent was French."

"You should have mentioned it to me," said Don Jeronimo softly.

"Why should I? One does not pay attention to trifles."

"In time of war nothing is a trifle. Vilchez speaks fluently—too fluently it now appears—both French and German. For all we know, he speaks English as well. Rapua's movements are known at the fort before he has time to put them into execution. You must have heard of the ransacking of Aguiar's house by the military. Fortunately all his papers had been moved elsewhere, for safety."

"But that was more than a month ago; and why should it be linked up with Vilchez?" inquired the Abbess testily; she did not allow even Don Jeronimo to pick her up on a point of duty.

"Why not, for example, with Don Mateo Flood?" was the slow, considered reply.

The Abbess gaped. She picked up her fan and began to agitate it nervously.

"This is a riddle, my friend? You must excuse me—my brain works slowly—for which you must blame your good wine!"

"Not so puzzling." The Jesuit stretched out his hand and picked up a pack of cards; both he and his visitor were amateurs of *bézique*. But it was not to deal that he shuffled the pack negligently between his thin fingers. To mark each separate point he laid a card on the table between them, beginning with the "Sota," or Knave, of Money. "Don Mateo Flood—eh? A neat symbol! Merchant and shipowner, he arrives in Havana to join in the trade scramble, profiting by a meeting with young Estebán Rodríguez to establish himself in society. Society? It is perhaps not the name for the company at the casa Rodríguez, which includes not only a number of the younger Catholics and most of the town harlots but the soi-disant priest Vilchez." (The nine of bastos lay at the side of the Sota.)

"You are sure of that?" muttered the Abbess. She did not like the way things were going; her beautiful plans seemed on the verge of crumbling to dust.

"Among the diversions offered by Don Mateo to his guests there was, on the occasion I have in mind, a mock marriage ceremony, performed by Vilchez between the Englishman and his negro mistress. It was on the night following this performance that Aguiar's house was seized——"

"Well——?"

"—the company which witnessed the 'marriage' including two of Aguiar's young supporters who were too drunk to remember what indiscretions they might have committed in the course of the night's entertainment. They have since given it as their opinion that they were deliberately plied with drink to loosen their tongues."

"A mock marriage!" said the Abbess, seizing, womanlike, on the least important point in the discourse. "That's blasphemy. It ought to be reported."

Don Jeronimo smiled faintly.

"Let us return for a moment to Don Mateo. He arrives ostensibly for trade. How much time has he devoted to the pursuit of his interests? What affairs has he concluded? Latterly, it is admitted, he has been mixing in trading circles: but he may have had a warning, through Vilchez—or others. For two months, certainly, he did nothing but cultivate a set of companions of whom were at least four—I have their names—who are suspected of working against our interests, and for those of the British. The casa Rodríguez is regarded in some quarters as a clearing-house for anti-loyalist propaganda."

"I have always heard it spoken of as a brothel," stated the Abbess bluntly.

"The brothels have played their part in our local politics," he reminded her. The Abbess bit her thumbnail.

"And Vilchez?" she propounded.

"His arrival, if you remember, took place a few months before the outbreak of the war. He went to Don Manuel of Santa Cautana, a good, spiritual, but not, it is to be feared, very observant man, whose Latin manuscripts mean more to him than the actualities of existence. He accepted, it would seem too

readily, the credentials presented by Vilchez: the tale of the disbanded community——”

“It is surprising the Bishop accepted them so easily!”

“Ah, well—Don Manuel was always a favourite with the Bishop; they were at college together—and Santa Cautana is a big parish—especially for a man of Don Manuel’s age. The newcomer might as well make himself of use, pending inquiries: which, it now appears, were never made. First, because of the obeah question, investigation into which was absorbing all of His Lordship’s attention; and second, because of the arrival of the enemy. Meanwhile, the activities of Vilchez seem to have been doubtful; very doubtful indeed. Apart from the question of morality, his association with persons of dubious integrity has exposed him for a long while to suspicion, and it is the opinion of many that he is in liaison with traitors to Catholic interests.”

“*Por dios*, and you would involve me with these traitors?” demanded the Abbess indignantly. Don Jeronimo shook his head.

“Nothing of the sort, my friend. A close observation of the Englishman’s activities has proved that, although he may be, to some degree, a cat’s-paw, he has no interest in religion or politics.”

The Abbess puffed out a sigh of relief.

“Ay, Don Jeronimo! I have had my experience of political circles; one gets to know a certain look in a man’s eye, a gesture, a tone of voice. . . . This Fludd person (bah, how graceless these English names are!) is too angry, too human, above all, too much of a sentimentalist, to make a politician!”

“That, without having met him, is my own impression—which the information supplied by Don Pablo supports. A pity I have not the English! It would amuse me to meet this Señor Flood. The English are a curious race: full of stupidity, of suspicion where none is needed, and of *naïveté* where suspicion would serve them better.” He tapped the cards with an immaculate finger-nail. “As to Vilchez——”

“You have spoken to Don Manuel?”

“As well speak to a child: can’t you see him, blinking his eyes, accusing me of uncharity to my fellow-religious? Providence has, however, put into my hands two letters, which, as they are in English, you will perhaps be so good as to translate for me.”

Ten minutes later they sat aghast over the proofs that the soi-disant Spanish priest, Don Eduardo Vilchez, was an Englishman of the name of Villars, and his carefully built-up story of flight from anti-Jesuitical feeling in the southwestern regions of Spain as false as his pretensions to the priesthood.

II

Matthew began by refusing point-blank the proposition the Abbess put to him. Even allowing for the exceptional circumstances, it went beyond all reason! She was coldly determined, he not less so. He cut short a discussion he regarded as outrageous and ended the interview. He had no intention of being bled; his conscience was not as raw as all that! Nor was Santa Clara the only hospital in the town. There were, as a matter of fact, two others, and his first action on leaving the convent was to make inquiries about both.

The information he received was discouraging: both hospitals were crowded out—one with military and with local victims of the siege; the other with the "black vomit," a disease which had only found its way to the island a year or two before, by means of an Indian ship which touched at Vera Cruz in the height of the mosquito season.

In despair Matthew went to call on Sir William Keppel, who had taken over from Lord Albemarle; but during the time he was kept waiting in one of the ante-rooms of the *Vieja Fuerza*, that had been since 1542 the official residence of the governors of Cuba, the folly and questionable taste of his mission so took possession of his consciousness that he made his excuses hurriedly to the aides-de-camp and left the fortress. He must have been mad to enlist the interest of the supreme representative of the British Government in the fate of his negro mistress.

There was not, in fact, a person on the island who would not have regarded his anxiety as eccentric to the point of folly, and despised him for it; certainly none—now Clark was laid away—to whom he could appeal for care of Sheba and the child after he was gone.

The most he had managed to secure was a promise from Don Pablo to keep the boy (if it was a boy) under his supervision, to give him as much education as he was capable of assimilating, and, in all events, to see that he was not sent to work on the plantations.

"I will do all in my power; but the position is not an easy one. What, for instance, is a mulatto lad to do in a town like this, without falling into evil associations? No occupation is open to him but some menial post in a household—or he might go down to the harbour, where any education must be wasted," pointed out Don Pablo.

Matthew felt the grip of nausea that always seized him when his child was spoken of as a mulatto.

"Are there no other prospects for—mulattos?" He stumbled over the word. "Surely it is not reasonable that, with a population the size of yours, the children of mixed parentage should not in some instances arrive at some sort of independence, and even—prosperity?"

"But naturally," was the mild reply. "The man who, by industry and perseverance, saves enough to buy himself a small piece of land, whether he be white or mulatto, so long as he is not a slave, can earn a decent competence without dependence on anybody. He can, for instance, raise *majola* and sell it at a good price; or, if his holding is not large enough for the cultivation of grain, he can grow vegetables and peddle them round the towns and villages with his donkey. You have not yet made acquaintance of our country regions, señor; I assure you that the *monteros* are a happy and hardy, though improvident, lot; there are even *monteros* who keep slaves, to help them in the cultivation of their maize, pigs and poultry, and who share their indigence as well as their times of plenty."

A great wave of relief swept over Matthew. If he could at least do this thing—secure independence for his son, safeguard him against the disgusting fate of some of those lounging wasters he saw in the streets, or going furtively about their dubious errands around the docks, he could be content. He began to discuss with Don Pablo how this might be arranged: making it clear that the priest should profit from his pains, either personally or through his church.

Don Pablo spoke frankly; his church was a rich one, and well endowed. It was in his study of medical science that he craved assistance.

And while Matthew's tired mind grappled with these and other problems; while Sheba went through her mute torment—sometimes well enough, for a day or two, to wander about the house, sometimes too sick and wretched to do anything but crouch in her room—the *Cassiopæia* sailed into Havana harbour, having made a record crossing, for it was barely six months since she had set out on her second trip to the Gold Coast.

III

For Matthew, in his state of mental enervation, the sight of Abiathar was the best tonic that could have been devised. The horny grip of a mittened hand gave him contact with a world of reality after months of nightmare. Not less grateful was the news Abiathar brought him: of a cargo of six hundred prime slaves, with a mere five per cent loss on the crossing: as much ivory as they could carry, and wax and gold of good qualities to translate into the commodities the Cubanos traded with the peninsular and the English ports. Matthew had already made provisional deals with the planters, and the storage he had chartered (having failed, as yet, to purchase the land for the erection of warehouses of his own) was stocked with muscovado, hides and other merchandise, for which, on Abiathar's instructions, he had bargained. He had not, after all, done so badly; Abiathar's grunt of satisfaction, when he was shown the bills of lading, told him that.

After disposing of the slaves the ship had to be overhauled, cleaned and fumigated, for which, said Abiathar, it was not wise to count less than a month; after which they could look for a favourable wind to carry them out of the Spanish Main.

A month, thought Matthew, gave him ample time to complete his arrangements; to bring the Abbess of Santa Clara to reason, and to see Sheba safely bestowed in her care. His renewed optimism received a check the same night.

He and Abiathar sat over roast sucking pig, rejoicing in the freedom of each other's company, no less than in the gratifying outcome of the last voyage.

"By God, it's good to speak one's own tongue again! I'd have been in a fine quandary if it hadn't been for that six months' affair I had with little Mademoiselle Victorine of the ballet, who drove me against my will to learn her plaguy language, because she was too lazy to apply herself to mine!"

The old vein of braggartry had revived; Matthew had, in fact, taken the trouble to employ a French tutor, not on account of Mademoiselle Victorine (for every one knows that the vocabulary of lovers is of the briefest) but because in the society it was his ambition to frequent the knowledge of French was as essential as the carriage of a cane.

"Wait till you know Havana, my boy! I'll show you a few samples that will open your eyes on the subject of female beauty—though I warn you to be discreet in your approaches; the people here are uncommonly free with their swords, and there is a deal of ceremony—did you, by the way, come to an understanding with my uncle before leaving Barbados?"

Abiathar shook his head, and the great, rufus beard champed up and down with his chewing.

"I'd time to think it over, and, to put it plain, I come to the conclusion a maid like that ain't for the likes o' me." There was a curious, stubborn wistfulness in his voice that made Matthew scowl at his plate to avoid embarrassing his companion. "Come to think of it, a slave ship's no place for a decent maid, and you know I ain't got means to retire. 'Tain't human, either, for a woman to be true to a fella she sees once in a twelvemonth—or more."

"You said nothing, then, to Janet?"

"I tried to, but the words stuck in my throat. If I'd cared less I'd likely have been bolder. A maid's eyes can turn ye to pulp. They hanged a nigger, by the way, for the murder of your friend Foxley."

"How the deuce do you know that?" asked Matthew, accepting the change of subject.

"The *Melchior* came in just afore we left Fort Charles. Seeing it was Foxley, they'd got to hang somebody . . . and now, they say, your uncle's trying to buy Foxley's plantation."

"Good God, he'll own the whole of the island soon!"

"It 'ud suit Jonathan to have himself crowned king. He ain't short of heirs apparent."

"And how's the fort? How did you find them all—Pleydell?—and my friend Jimmy Montcalm?" For all the lightness of mockery that he put into his voice, Matthew felt a tingle of apprehension as he asked the question. He had wanted to ask it all the evening; it seemed as though the words would not shape themselves on his lips, until now, when the wine he had drunk emboldened him.

This time it was Abiathar's eyes which avoided his companion's.

"Jimmy's dead," he said shortly, and plunged his fork again into the central dish.

There was a pause before Matthew said softly:

"Ay? It's not surprising. Nothing's surprising, except Jimmy's determination to live."

"Determination's no good—against some things."

"Against death, for instance?" The black, burning gaze of the younger man forced Abiathar's eyes to meet his own. They sat silent, fixing each other.

"Against fire," said Abiathar at last.

"So that was the way of it." Matthew's hand went out mechanically to the carafe of wine; he set his teeth as it clinked sharply on the edge of his glass.

"Jimmy was burned up in his house; they say he must have been drunk. They've put him up a stone in the hopyard. . . ."

"Well," grated Matthew, after another pause, "does it end there?"

"No, it does not," was the grim retort. "Pleydell's bristling like a hedgehog, and don't be surprised if you hear more o' the matter when we get back to England, for he's written a full account to the Company, and he's mad enough not to mince matters. Not to mention the fort's ablaze about our carrying deserters, which there was no point in denying; for the crew can swear they was with us, and all I could do was make out they was stowaways, and we never set eyes on 'em until we was three days out. By Christmas, you

left a dirty track for me to cover!—and I give you fair warning, till they get a new governor, keep away from Fort Charles.”

The stem of Matthew's wineglass snapped, and a little trickle of blood appeared on his forefinger.

“I had not taken into consideration the popularity of Jimmy Montcalm.”

“Popularity be——! Don't ye know what it means to connive at murder?”

“Murder was not in my mind. And, if it had been—the punishment for murder's hanging, isn't it? If it's any gratification for you to know it, I'd as soon have hanged as gone through some of my experiences since arriving here in Cuba!” The surprise, mixed with consternation, on Abiathar's face checked him; he stared, then laughed joylessly. “Don't alarm yourself! I've got into no more difficulties for you to deal with. At least, my present troubles are my own. . . . Only don't, for God's sake, think I feel any compunction for Montcalm's death. If I have a regret it's that I didn't shoot him with my own hand. Except that shooting's too good for such vermin. He only got what he deserved. . . .”

“Come, let us go out of doors,” he said, rising abruptly. “You have yet to see the palace that Rodríguez put at my disposal! I am absolutely converted to this Spanish style of building, 'Biathar; there is nothing half so pretty or graceful in England, and if I decide to build I shall certainly employ a Spanish architect. The lack of provision for cold weather will not prevent me, for I shall always flee the English winters. We shall have some company to-morrow night, and you shall see how fine this patio looks filled with pretty women and these devilish handsome Cuban fellows——”

The words were interrupted by the old major-domo, Pedro, who came shuffling to Matthew's elbow; he muttered something into Matthew's ear.

At first he did not understand; the creole French and the unfamiliar words employed defeated his comprehension. Then, suddenly, from Pedro's gesture, and from the appearance on the gallery of the two nuns looking anxiously over into the patio, he understood. Sheba's labour had prematurely begun.

All the power went out of his limbs, down which he felt the cold trickle of sweat. With a curt word to Abiathar, he turned to leap up the stairs.

“*Mala—muy mala*,” was all he could gather of what the nuns said to him. He did not need the warning after a glance at Sheba. A sudden, blind terror came over him that she would die, here and now, before they got her to the hospital. The nuns seemed inexperienced and as frightened as Matthew of that writhing shape, mocked by its shadow upon the wall: of the inhuman noises that came through the distorted lips.

Quickly he commanded the coach, and when word was brought that it was there, conquering he knew not what of repugnance, of mortal horror, he picked her up in his arms and carried her down the stairs. As he was doing this his disassociated mind thought: “If I really loved her I could not do this; I should be petrified with terror!”

Abiathar waited below, his jaw dropping, purple with astonishment and mystification; Matthew whispered in passing:

“Come with us. Ride outside, if you will.” He took comfort from the thought of Abiathar there on the box, large, stolid, wondering what it was all about.

The journey—a bare ten minutes on foot—seemed like eternity. Sheba lay

across his knees, unaware of him or of herself, with a greenish froth at the corners of her bitten lips. He tried, by bracing himself in the corner, to spare her the jolting of the tyreless wheels over the deeply rutted road surfaces. It was like a ship rocking between the towering crags of some narrow strait: now one wall, now the other, swung up to the windows, stone ground on woodwork, although it was the duty of the negro who hung on behind so to manipulate the thick woollen ropes, like bell-cords, that swung between their upper and lower points of attachment, that they acted as fenders to the paintwork and mouldings. The linkboys' torches threw a smoky, restless light on the walls in passing, so that it seemed as though the walls had a movement of their own that added to the grimness of that slow journey—the last they were to have together of all their voyaging.

Her hand slipped, and he heard its knuckles rap on the floor of the coach; that hand, once so warm, so vital—always, to his imagination, faintly perfumed with the native odours of her forests—was now damp with an earthy chill.

They had taken off her bracelets, for fear, in her tossing, she should injure herself with them; and there remained only those thin bangles a loving mother had slipped on a little girl's arm away back on Combre river: a little, gay girl, whose joy was to chase butterflies and to dance on conjo nights for delight of her strong, untrammelled limbs. It was that little girl's soul that struggled now, in its cage of tormented flesh, to escape back, back up the broad river—to add one more firefly to those that starred the jungle nights.

He lifted a helpless hand, and, in doing so, felt something on a finger. A sudden flash of torchlight showed him the little golden serpent, "emblem of eternal felicity," that Pallas had given him before going to Gloucester. This was the ring they had snatched from his finger to push on hers on the night of the mock marriage, and though he had several times tried to reclaim it from her, her resentment had defeated him.

His impulse now was to take advantage of her unconsciousness to regain it; yet he could not bring himself to do so. It could do no harm to Pallas where it was, and he would never wear it again. As though she felt his regard, her eyelids twitched, an ophidian glint showed for a moment between the dark fringes of her lashes. He heard himself say "Sheba!" as he might have called on a favourite dog.

Her eyes opened widely; there was no fear left in them, and hardly any pain; only an infinite resignation. It did not matter where they were taking her; there were only two things left, to have her baby and to die. Nothing in all her short life of chance and inconsistency was as certain as that. But there was one thing that disturbed her; her fading strength gathered itself into a point of interrogation to resolve it.

"My baby . . . not make slave."

She said it twice before he gathered her meaning; then, sharply aware of a bond of emotion never before perceived between them, he tightened his clasp.

"No, Sheba. I give you my word. Never."

". . . Love . . ." she said, and closed her eyes.


Did it mean she loved him, or loved her unborn child, or simply left her love behind? he wondered, through the hot rain of tears which, to his horror, poured down his face.

He had not allowed for the fact that, at this hour of the night, the great gates of the convent would be closed. After prolonged dragging on the bell the shutter behind the little grille shot back and the cracked voice of the old nun who acted as night janitor demanded the business of the visitors.

She spoke only Spanish, and Matthew could only repeat the word "*enfermería*." She muttered something and started to close the shutters; he thrust his fingers through the grille to prevent her, swearing with rage and with horror, for the groaning had started again. But the negro footman, who stood at his elbow, had evidently caught her meaning, for he made Matthew understand by gestures that the entrance to the hospital was farther along the street. In response to Matthew's frantic gestures the coach drove on.

Another great archway, blocked by wooden doors. Not content with ringing, this time he battered on them. Another grille unmasked itself, and he cried through it the only words he knew: "*Mujer—muerta*." Woman—death.

There was only a short pause before the doors swung open, the coach lumbered through, drew up in a vast patio. There was suddenly a little crowd of startled nuns, whom he ignored, calling on Abiathar to help him to lift the groaning woman off the seat where he had left her lying. In doing so he pulled, as though by accident, a corner of the yellow shawl in which they had wrapped her across her face; and thus Sheba was carried into Santa Clara.



CHAPTER XVI

I

"CANNOT you see, Don Mateo," said the Abbess vexedly, "the position you place me in? What guarantees have you to offer? You think I have driven a hard bargain; so much is clear. How am I to know that to-morrow, when—as seems likely—all is over, you will not find some means of extricating yourself from the whole or part of your share of the bargain? You are quite clever enough to know that, for the sake of my own reputation, as well as that of the convent, I could bring no claim against you."

He was nonplussed: not knowing what to offer that could have any weight in her scale of values.

"The word of a heretic stands for nothing?" he muttered.

The Abbess smiled; her smile, when she abandoned herself to it, was very sweet, like the smile of many old and coarse-looking women. She was silent, her stretched lips pressed together, the protuberant lower one, purplish, creasing the lower part of her jaw into folds of benevolence. Still looking at Matthew, her hands still pressed on the table, she curved back the palm and fingers of the right one slightly, and let them fall again. There was a rustle, a faint tinkle of disturbed curtain-rings, and the nun who had so far been present at this interview was gone. They were alone.

The Abbess dropped her hands in her lap; they sought and found the long silver chain of her crucifix, which she drew upwards; and, leaning with both elbows on the table, dangled the cross before Matthew's eyes.

"What does that stand for to *you*, señor?" she asked.

Again he was at a loss. What indeed did the crucifix stand for to any Protestant—he supposed he was a Protestant, his family always having professed the Protestant faith—but an unpleasant, Popish bauble that was forbidden in their churches? The members of his uncle Jason's sect went so far as to advocate the seizure and destruction of all crucifixes, rosaries and symbols connected with the celebration of the Mass. That, so far as Matthew went, was enough to prejudice him in their favour. But he had never owned a crucifix, or considered one, apart from its artistic value; he had never had one under his roof, before coming to Havana.

As she still waited for his answer:

"I can hardly say," he heard himself stammering. "I am not a Catholic: I—we—do not acknowledge the crucifix in my—our—faith."

"My son," said the Abbess, and her voice was as deep as the roll of African drums, "the Cross does not need acknowledgment; it IS. And no heresy in the world will ever dispose of it." She swung it lightly in her fine hand. "Here is the answer to all your questions, and to all mine; the expiation of all your sins, and of all mine. All doubt and all evil resolve themselves here; and that is why all men, if they have doubted much or sinned much, come to the Cross in the end."

Cold fingers touching him again: fingers belonging to a hand no less

powerful than it was invisible. His brain felt paralysed, as his body was paralysed, by some sort of hypnotism that emanated from this old woman, or from the Thing that dangled from her fingers.

"Look well on it, my son," the heavy voice was saying, "for you will come to it again; perhaps by an agonizing path. Oh, blessed agony!—of which each step is a station of the Cross." There was a quality of voluptuousness, even of earthy rapture, in the voice, that escaped Matthew, in his state of confusion. His brain had become a channel, through which raced the thoughts his brain could not control: thoughts of the waiting coach, of Abiathar pacing the patio, of Sheba, passing unheeded through her agony—at this last, his will struggled to assert itself, and was pressed back, like a child that struggles in its sleep.

"You are not a heathen—an unbeliever?" she had interrupted herself to ask.

He shook his head.

"There have been times when I wished I were!"

"Wish it no longer, the consciousness of God is all the soul needs to bring it to salvation in the end. Only—do not forget that the only truth lies here." Her nail tapped the tiny ivory feet of the Christ. "You accept that, my son?"

"I will accept it," muttered Matthew. Truth might, indeed, as well lie there as anywhere else. What was truth?—or rather, what did she mean by truth? No doubt the Catholic religion, that if a man needed religion, was as good as any other. His need of it seemed very far in the future—if it existed at all.

"Then," she said briskly, "you will not object to swearing on the symbol of all truth that you will keep your word to me? I say, 'to me,' because I seek always a form of words that I think you will understand; but it is not to me you give your promise, but to the Church. Wait a moment—"

He had taken the crucifix from her hand, and the nun had come back into the room. The two women spoke rapidly in Spanish; the nun withdrew, to stand by the door, her head lowered, her hands tucked into her sleeves. Matthew took the oath, first in English, then, repeating the Abbess's words, in Spanish; he was aware that the nun was there as the Abbess rose, stroking down the heavily pleated folds of her habit. She said in a dry voice:

"Well, Don Mateo. Your daughter is born."

It was as though all his veins let loose the blood that beat upwards towards his brain. The nun, obeying a sign from the Abbess, was offering him a cup of wine; with a movement of disgraceful violence, he dashed it from her hand.

"So that's your trickery, ma'am? So I'm to pay, am I, for nothing?—for a few feet of space in which a poor woman was left, like a dog, to go through her labour unaided, while you see what profit is to be made out of the situation? No cross, let me tell you, is going to hold me to my word in the face of this."

The Abbess rubbed her nose reflectively, looking down at the carpet across which was flung the dark stain of the wine.

"You know, you are a very uncivilized young man. That carpet is an original—a unique—from Ispahan." She signed the nun to pick it up and carry it away. While he choked with her cold-bloodedness, she lifted her eyes and smiled at him.

"Come now, where do you get your notions of villainy? I suppose that, like all heretics, you have no conception of spiritual discipline, you regard us as monsters of inhumanity! Take your wine, señor"—she nodded to the carafe, and to another cup which the nun had left on the table—"and presently you will meet Sister Consuelo de la Cruz, the most skilled of my hospital staff, who took the case in charge when we left the hospital buildings to come in here; she will give you her account—for which you must be anxious" (there was a fine flavour of irony in the tone) "—of the mother and child."

"Then why, in God's name, ma'am, did you allow me to think——?" stammered Matthew, nonplussed between relief and anger at the trick she had played him.

"As a heretic, señor, you cannot be given a penance," was the cool reply. "You will not grudge a little purge to your conscience?" She held out her strong hand, which he grasped with respect for, and, at the same time, a desire to laugh at, the cunning and strength of this old woman. Their eyes twinkled at each other with momentary appreciation of each other's qualities. "Sister María Magdalena will conduct you back to the hospital. Good-night, señor; we shall meet again—to-morrow?"

He refused the nun's invitation to enter, when they reached the hospital patio; he took in silence the expected news—that Sheba was dead. Ordering the coachman to drive home, he thrust his arm through Abiathar's, and the pair of them walked home, talking in low voices, through the moonlit streets.

II

He had discharged his debts to the convent; that is to say, he had made the convent the "gift" exacted for the benefit of its services—the thousand milled English guineas at which the astute old woman had assessed the value of his peace of mind. He paid for the attendance on Sheba during that short hour that sufficed to put her child into the world, and paid for the child's baptism—a trifling matter, and performed gratis for the slaves, but it figured in the Abbess's account. He paid for Sheba's interment—which could not take place in consecrated ground: that, he allowed them to see, was a matter of indifference to him. Unconsecrated earth is no less kindly than the other sort to tired human flesh. The firefly had gone back—up Combre river; what mattered the empty chrysalis?

"And the child? What happens to that?"

She looked at him, considering.

"What do you wish to happen to it, Don Mateo?"

He threw out his hands with a gesture of relinquishment. At least, thank God, it was not a boy!

"How should I know what happens to children born in these circumstances?"

"It is easy to find them homes. The negro and mulatto women think nothing of adding an odd infant or two to their litter!"

"And—later on?"

She spread out her hands.

"*Quien sabe?* There are plenty of good households in which, if they show

any aptitude, they find employment." She took pity on his look of vexed confusion. "It is not the same thing, you know, as being a slave. Many of the mulatto girls are free—" She paused. "Would it please you to see the child?" As he made a gesture of recoil, she added quietly, "It is not *very* dark." She had much humanity, that old woman, and she had come to know the man with whom she was dealing.

"Is there no way in which it could be kept, at any rate during its infancy, under your protection?"

"That would be difficult." She pursed her lips. "There is, first of all, the question of providing a nurse for it; my nuns"—she chuckled—"are not qualified for that duty! The laundress, who is looking after it at present, is an honest woman. . . . Do not trouble yourself, Don Mateo; we will do the best we can. I have also my share of the bargain to observe—and Nature herself, you know, is very kind to these little animals!"

He could not forbear to smile.

"Nature, ma'am, can be plaguily capricious; and I can't rid myself of a feeling of compunction towards the poor worm."

"A sign of grace." She looked away. "It is your first child, señor?"

"My first." To both, the words had a portentous ring.

It was the same evening that Sister Consuelo de la Cruz brought to the Abbess's parlour a cocoon-shaped bundle that she handled with a curious tender expertness—for a nun.

"Faquita the laundry woman says her milk is nearly finished; but she has a niece who has just had a baby, and she would take it, when Faquita is done."

The Abbess was writing letters; she lifted her head and looked thoughtfully at the cocoon.

"*Nenita—chiquitilla!*" she observed absently, and poked it with the amethyst handle of her pen. It gave out a thin, doubtful wail. She tapped the pen against her teeth.

"This niece—you had better see her; find out if she is healthy."

The sister nodded.

"I think she lives up the mountain."

"Eh? That will not do. That will not do at all. It must be close at hand—under our supervision."

Again the sister inclined her head, and, as the Abbess returned to her letter-writing, moved towards the door—where she paused.

"Well?" grunted the Abbess, knowing the meaning of the pause. At the word of encouragement, Sister Consuelo's thin, olive face lit up with the eagerness of the convent-dweller to share any piece of news.

"Word has just come that they've taken one of the priests from Santa Cautana to prison! It can't be Don Manuel. Sister María Magdalena is very much upset"—the nun's eyelashes flickered and were lowered, at this neat way of getting even with an old enemy—"for fear it might be her great friend, Don Enrique. She swooned quite away on hearing the news, and two of the novices had to help her to her cell."

"Tell Sister María Magdalena not to be a fool, and to get on with her work," said the Abbess crisply. "It is *not* Don Enrique—so much the better if it were!" She did not usually permit herself these informalities with her staff, but Sister Consuelo was a privileged subject. She was perfectly aware

of the asperity between the two Sisters, and it amused her, now and again, to add a little fuel to a bonfire which had smouldered from the day of Sister Consuelo's arrival and her appointment over the elder woman's head to a position of which Sister María Magdalena's incorrigible dreaminess and a lackadaisical way with a measuring spoon had cheated her. The hospital was the Abbess's mania: she would tolerate no oversights *there*.

When Sister Consuelo had gone, she did not continue her letters. Instead, she rested her chin on her hand, and thought. After thinking, she very seldom made a mistake. . . .

After further conference with the Abbess, Matthew left a sum of money in trust, to be dispensed in the care and upbringing of the infant. During this time, at his rumoured departure from the island, the accounts came rolling in for the huge sums he had spent in entertaining his guests, and the extravagances with which he had loaded his mistress. He went over them coldly, holding back the emotions that arose in reading such items as "Ten pairs of slippers, in varied silks and leathers"; "a set of toilette implements in gold, inset with precious stones"; "seven gowns, with their accessories of riband, feather and lacings, in cut brocade, satins and lustring." And—"A hundred various birds, in cages." Parrots, parrakeets and canaries, that from their gilded prisons poured forth continual floods of ear-splitting song. He had discovered that she loved noise, and had bought her these to beguile the hours when he was not by her side.

On impulse, he mounted the stairs, and passing along the gallery with its rounded arches that overlooked the patio, set open the door of each cage: then he clapped his hands, and all the arches filled themselves with a whirring of wings, the patio was flaked suddenly with gold, with blue and green more brilliant than its own *azulejo*: that hovered and poised for a little before gathering itself into a great coloured cloud that swept upward and soared into the enamelled sky, carrying a part of his life with it.

He then went down again to the accounts, which no amount of sentiment or revulsion from the past should prevent his examining to their last farthing. He had seen enough of the Havanese tradesfolk to be resolved they should not make capital out of his troubles. The jewellers should take back their wares, the costumiers and haberdashers at least as much as survived Sheba's light-hearted negligence.

"You'll come down and see the cargo, before it goes to the yards?" Abiathar prompted him.

He had no enthusiasm, but it was the least he could do in return for Abiathar's labours; the latter was also evidently eager to show off his stock. They walked down together when the heat had gone off the town, to where the slaves were corralled, close to the harbour, under roofs of matting that afforded little protection from the sun. Several captains and prospective buyers were standing around, looking enviously at Abiathar's lot: over three hundred adults, with men well in the majority, and a hundred or so of youths and young children.

"Ay, they may well look glum"—Abiathar jerked his head towards a group of captains who, at their approach, turned on their heels and started to walk away. "Take a look at the other pens, an' you'll open yer eyes! Well, that's our lot, cock: fit and sound and passed by the surgeon—every

manjack of 'em. I got rid of the rubbish this morning, at a pound a head—and they was dear at that! There was one or two of the town bloods down here, casting their eye over the young females, as well. I'll wager there'll be some pretty sharp bidding when this lot comes up."

For the moment, the slaves were very quiet, sitting, most of them, on the hot earth, relieved by this interval in their martyrdom. A young woman with an infant at her breast crouched close to where Matthew and Abiathar were standing; the tender curve of her body round the unconscious babe gave proof of her oblivion of all save the fact of her motherhood. A girl of twelve leaned against the mother's shoulder, sharing in the act of silent adoration.

A young, proud girl squatting with her back against one of the awning supports might have been Sheba. The time he had spent up at Omo, seeing these people in all the free dignity of their natural surroundings, proud and simple and intent on their labours, burned in Matthew's memory; then Black Jack-anna's; the barracoons, Jimmy Montcalm and his kind; the glimpses he had had of his uncle's plantations; then the expatriated sluts of Havana—and it was as though his soul cried out "I can't!", though what it could or what it could not he did not at the time understand.

Then it seemed as though all the faces were turned towards him, all the dumb, dark eyes were looking in on his soul—he made a great effort to throw off this painful impression; indeed, it seemed absurd that he, who had seen the slaves in conditions of horror by which he had barely been affected, should suffer these sensations of abhorrence in watching them now, when they were, so to speak, at peace and at rest.

He began to feel as if he might vomit. The still overwhelming heat, the smell of the slaves, the strong, hot body of Abiathar at his side, giving off with its odour of sweat the aroma of pride and satisfaction, began to stifle him. He found himself envying Abiathar his satisfaction, his simple, direct pride in the fulfilment of his task, his indifference to all it involved. It was the ideal frame of mind in which to go through life, untroubled by shades, by subtleties, by doubts. . . . "That is why all men, if they have sinned much, or doubted much, come to the Cross in the end. . . ."

"You ain't got touched by the sun, have you?" Abiathar was looking at him suspiciously.

Rallying, Matthew laughed shortly and clapped his companion's shoulder. Jerking his head towards the slaves without looking at them, he said:

"Good work. You'll not take it ill if I leave you?—for God knows I've enough clearing-up to do to last me until we sail for England."

As he walked back to the Casa Rodríguez, his limbs felt as weak as though he had come through a bout of fever, and this physical instability was accompanied by a queer, disrupted sensation, as of being in a house and feeling the foundations sag under one.

III

Nor were these all the vexations to which Matthew was exposed before leaving the island. He found himself summoned to an ecclesiastical court, over which presided the principal of the Jesuit college, Don Fernando del Val,

to give evidence in the prosecution of the negress, Linda, on a charge of obeah-practice. The hounds of the Church had at last run her to earth, half-starved and crazy with terror, in a cellar of a house occupied by the English military.

It revolted Matthew to witness against the wretched creature, so obviously witless and ready to die of fright at the prospect of her fate. Her shrieks and cries of denial brought an element of horror into the court, that left no trace upon the cold faces of the inquisitors. She was removed while Matthew, through the interpreter, and also Don Pablo, and two or three of the Rodríguez servants, furnished the evidence which was to send her to the stake.

Having gathered that his share in the business was over, Matthew bowed to the President and was about to leave the court, when a messenger from the President's table made him understand that he was recalled.

The court was cleared; there remained only the President, flanked on one side by the Abbot of San Bartolomé and on the other by a man Matthew found himself instinctively distrusting: Don Jeronimo Madariaga. He felt himself stiffening against this vaunting of Catholic power, and against something oppressive and malevolent in the air of the three men whose eyes focused coldly upon him. The Cross that reared itself behind the President's seat was no symbol of mercy, but of intimidation, and in the almost lifesize figure of the Christ the painting of the wounds and the blood was executed with a gloating realism that suggested a mind obsessed with cruelty.

Don Fernando, a small, white-faced man, whose pink-rimmed lashless eyes and protruding middle teeth gave him the air of a guinea-pig, addressed himself to Matthew in French.

"Señor Flood. You have, during your residence in the island, made some acquaintance of Havanese society."

Matthew instantly became wary. He had heard enough of the network of espionage that ran through the island to be on his guard against questions involving his new acquaintances.

"Superficially, yes: my ignorance of the language has prevented my taking any serious part in it."

"What brought you here?"

"Obviously business, but mainly—diversion." It was impudence, for he guessed that his audience was well informed on the subject of his diversions. No flicker, however, disturbed the three impassive faces. Don Jeronimo, by far the most distinguished in appearance of the three, took snuff with an elegant twist of a pointed thumb and finger.

"And we may take it that your social life has, on several occasions, brought you in touch with the religious communities?"

His forewarned thoughts flew at once to the Abbess. Was this some attempt to trap her, to involve her in trouble with the Commissioners? He formed his reply carefully in his mind before answering.

"In his medical capacity, Don Pablo Jiménez has been of service to me. That is all."

There was a silence. Don Jeronimo bent quickly forward and spoke to the President, who nodded sharply.

"Think again, señor."

Anger burnt up in him, at this unwarrantable interference in his private affairs.

"I have no need to think. As I am not a Catholic, it is hardly likely I should cultivate the communities."

The old Abbot of San Bartolomé leaned forward; his long, heavy face was not without benevolence, and his manner was more conciliatory than that of the others. He spoke an execrable French, that Matthew had difficulty in understanding.

"Do not misunderstand, señor. These questions have no bearing on you, or on your personal affairs."

Matthew bowed stiffly; he was not falling to that bait. The President took up the examination.

"You have nevertheless on several occasions entertained members of the clergy at your house."

"It is possible. My guests bring whom they please; in a large gathering one pays no particular attention to individuals who are unknown to one personally."

"All the same," insisted Don Fernando, with a glint of warning in his eye, "you may recall one occasion—one incident, in which a priest figured prominently."

There was a long pause before Matthew said coldly:

"I recall the incident to which you refer."

"And the name of the priest who figured in it?"

"Not immediately. It may come to my mind later on."

The three exchanged glances. The Abbot said silkily:

"Yet I understand the person to whom we are referring had been your guest on several occasions."

"That is possible. As my receptions were attended by anything from sixty to a hundred people, all of whom were strangers to me when I arrived in Havana, it is hardly to be expected I should remember their names!"

"How did you come in touch with these people, Señor Flood?"

Matthew hesitated; he recognized it was a dangerous question.

"I had a few letters of introduction," he said at last.

"From——?" prompted the Abbot.

"Obviously from Estebán Rodríguez, who put his house at Señor Flood's disposal," cut in the President impatiently.

"Now, señor: was there, among those letters, one addressed to Don Eduardo Vilchez?"

"Not to my recollection," began Matthew; then, as memory furnished a link, he added: "I remember now; at least I remember the name Vilchez. It is that of the priest whom you mentioned, is it not?"

"And who visited your house on at least half a dozen occasions."

"There may have been a dozen for all I know," said Matthew shortly. "Do you know any reason against it? From my own observation, I should not have said there was any embargo in this town on priests mingling in society."

An acid smile lifted Don Jeronimo's lip for a moment. The President frowned irritably.

"For reasons known only to yourself, señor, you seem determined to find

a personal motive in these questions. The Abbot of San Bartolomé has already told you there is none."

"I am at a loss to understand why I should be called on to act as informer in regard to people who have enjoyed my hospitality."

"You will understand before we have finished."

"And if I refuse to answer any more questions?"

"You will not do that, señor," was the quiet retort.

"What is your authority?" demanded Matthew angrily. "Let me remind you, sir, that, as a British subject, I have the right of appeal to Sir William Keppel, whose authority in Havana is supreme."

"On what should you appeal?" was the smooth rejoinder. "You have been offered no affront, no pressure was put on you to bring you here. You can leave now, if you please; only, if you do, it may be worse for the person we are discussing."

"For Vilchez? So far as I am concerned he can look after his own affairs. I don't know what this is all about. I don't care."

"Then you were not furnished with a letter to Don Eduardo, on coming to the island?" the President cut in on this somewhat petulant disclaimer.

"I certainly was not."

"Who brought him to your house?" the Abbot leaned forward to ask mildly.

"I have not the faintest idea. My guests arrived, sometimes, ten or twelve together; it is possible that the servants might know."

"And in the course of these visits, do you maintain, señor, that you never exchanged words with—this particular guest?"

Conquering his anger, Matthew moistened his lips and smiled slightly as he replied.

"It is evident, sir, that you do not know the informal character of my gatherings. My custom is to allow my guests to amuse themselves, and to find congenial companions. This, I am aware, is a method of entertainment which is not favoured by your society!—but it is the English style, and I may claim to have made it fashionable in Havana."

"You have not answered my question, señor. Did you or did you not have conversation with Don Eduardo Vilchez?"

"Probably." Matthew shrugged his shoulders. "Now you insist, it comes to my mind that there was an evening when we played cards, and the priest Vilchez was of the party at my table. I remember him, incidentally, not for his conversation, but for the dirtiness of his nails!"

"But there *was* conversation?" insisted the Abbot.

"As much conversation as there ever is over a table of *ombre*."

"No more than that?"

"After the ladies retired, there were refreshments. I had conversations with two or three; I have the impression that Vilchez was among them."

"The subject of the conversation——?"

"You will excuse me, sir; the refreshment was copious—and we had dined well!"

Again the smile flickered on Don Jeronimo's mask of a handsome wolf.

The president leaned forward, and Matthew sensed that the crucial question was coming.

"In what language did the conversation take place?"

Matthew was taken by surprise, and showed it.

"In what but French? I have no other means of making myself understood with the Cubans."

"Señor Flood: there was *no* occasion when Don Eduardo Vilchez addressed you—for instance—in English?"

"By God, I should remember it if he had!"

"You therefore accepted Don Eduardo Vilchez without hesitation as a Spaniard?"

"As far as I accepted him at all. I tell you, I hardly noticed the miserable little creature."

While a conference took place between the three interlocutors, Matthew left the padded rail at which he had stood to answer the questions and went to sit down in one of the high-backed velvet chairs. He folded his arms and swung one leg over the other in an attitude of deliberate defiance.

At the end of ten minutes, he was informed that the examination was over, and the degree of relief he felt when the door of the chamber closed behind him took him by surprise. At no moment of the interview had he, to his knowledge, been in danger; yet he was conscious of having been in contact with some power whose dark and grinding processes were as mysterious as they were formidable.

Never had the sun seemed so bright, the air about him so vast and free. His shadow went before him across a courtyard guarded by men-at-arms, hemmed in on all four sides with the buildings of San Ysidro and the Bishop's palace—empty since the coming of the British: one of those great piles of so-called coral limestone that formed the architecture of the greater part of Havana. The walls were like those of a fortress, no windows on the ground floor, and those above small and barred like the windows of a prison. Part of this building—he did not know, which—was the jail for prisoners under suspicion of offences against the Catholic church; he had heard about it, and about the atrocities practised therein.

His conscious rejoicing in his own freedom sent a pang through him at the thought of any human being—even a squalid little drunken priest—languishing in those dungeons, and he had a lively curiosity to know on what charge Vilchez had been brought there, and why he should be called on to testify against him. At any rate, he had the satisfaction of knowing that his evidence could not affect the poor wretch, either disadvantageously or the opposite.

His satisfaction was not shared by the court.

"A waste of time, ever, to question the English. They are our enemies, and they lie as easily as they breathe."

"Supposing," said Don Jeronimo, rising, "we have Carajas in, to hear if there are any results?"

... But there were no "results." After forty-eight hours of persuasion the remains of Don Eduardo Vilchez still returned a negative reply to his tormentors. Negative, that is to say, on the one vital point: that he had been supplying information to the enemy on Catholic activities. In that he persisted to the end; when a dim and shattered wreck admitted to the rest.

"Yes; he was Edward Villars"—a name he found it better to forget when

he bolted from his Somersetshire parish to avoid the unpleasant consequences of an unpriestly indiscretion. Unpriestly? It were truer to say, unparsonly: for he was ordained by the most Protestant of bishops, and presented to the living of Ample Major through the kind agency of a cousin to whom the very mention of the word Papist provoked an apoplexy (of which, eventually, he died).

Our Parson Villars had by then, avoiding an unfrocking, escaped to France, and thence to Spain, where, after a series of mildly discreditable adventures, he was so struck by the apparently advantageous position of the clergy, that he resolved, if possible, to enter the Catholic church. Before, however, his instruction was completed, the monastery was disbanded, and having heard much, through the priest who was instructing him, of a saintly old Cuban priest named Don Manuel Ortega, he had resolved to leave a country where the Jesuits (whose order he had hoped to join) were no longer in favour, and chance his hand in a new environment which, from all accounts, seemed suited to his temperament.

He had great gifts as a linguist, and it only occurred to him on the voyage to present himself as the fully-fledged priest for whom Don Manuel innocently accepted him. After the establishment of British power in Cuba he had begun to be afraid; and the letters which had been intercepted, and which resulted in his incarceration in San Ysidro, were written to a friend in England, to whom he had appealed for funds and assistance towards another living in the Church to which, actually, he had never ceased to belong.

None of these things were ever known to Matthew, to whom, in any case, they would only have appeared as local gossip; the possible interweaving of this strand of shoddy into the web of his own life would certainly never have crossed his mind.

It was only a matter of weeks before the terms of the Peace of Paris were known; the keys of Havana were solemnly handed by Sir William Keppel to the Teniente Rey, and Lieutenant-General Ambrosio Funes Villalpano, Conde de Rioja, drove in state through the city gates, to initiate the nine days' festivities which celebrated the return of Cuba to the Spanish. In the midst of such rejoicings, what thought was there to spare for a miserable little bogus priest languishing in the dungeons of San Ysidro? He was as forgotten by the Cubanos as he was by Matthew—by then tossing towards the shores of High Barbary.

CHAPTER XVII

I

UNDER all her canvas the *Cassiopæia* bumped over the short seas, grunting, as Matthew complained, like an overladen ass.

"The old ship's tired; there ain't no point in denying it. Hark at her; if she grumbles like this with all her shrouds to lift her, what'll she do when the wind whips round and we have to shorten canvas?" It was J. R. Bowling who spoke, with an anxious, seaman's eye on the reeling spread of sail between him and the fair, round arch of the sky. With the death of Foxon, the boatswain (he died of dysentery on the Middle Passage), Abiathar, who was never to be accused of overlooking a good man, had promoted Bowling in his place. The crew worked well under the new bo'sun, who, it appeared, had the art of preserving good feeling while maintaining discipline that owed not a little to his own strict observance of his proper duties.

The whole atmosphere of the ship—moral as well as physical—had changed with the removal of the brutalizing presence of the slaves. The cleansing and recaulking left her smelling of tar and sulphur, which yielded a little more each day to the scent of the brine, and even in the between-decks the ineradicable nigger-smell gave way to that of the cargo which packed the erstwhile barracoons. An after-purification weakness, almost a delicacy, lay on her—on her great bleached bulwarks, her decks of blinding whiteness, her sunburnt shrouds. Frail like a hornet's nest, the dazzling sunlight so enveloped her that she faded almost to invisibility between sky and horizon as she lent herself to the winds and made the best of her uncertain ten knots across the calm Atlantic.

"Have you made this passage before, Bowling?"

"No, sir. It's my first taste of the slave trade."

The two men, owner and seaman, were silent, reading each in the other's eyes the same thought: *And my last.*

"What do you make of it, after the Navy?"

The sudden question brought neither surprise nor alarm into the bo'sun's steady eyes.

"Much of a muchness, sir. Seafaring's scafaring, I reckon, whether you serve politics or trade."

"What made you quit the Navy?" pursued Matthew, his curiosity roused by the fact that Bowling made no denial of his former occupation.

"I was ordered a flogging, for refusing to give a pressed man seventy-two lashes," was the steady answer. "It was a poor 'natural' that didn't know his left hand from his right, and as I had no mind to take his punishment upon myself—nor yet to suffer in his place—I ran away: the ship being luckily in port, and friends at hand to give me assistance."

"Desertion in time of war——?"

"A man can serve his country no less in the trading service than in the battleships, in time of war"—with a straightforward look.

"You're right; though it's not the point of view of their lordships at the Admiralty," grimaced Matthew, admiring at the same time the lack of evasion and the decision of the reply. The brown face crumpled into a smile and the splinters of sapphire dwindled to mere pin-points as Bowling answered:

"The common seaman don't concern their lordships, so long as the quota's made up. There's plenty folks decry the slave trade, sir, but from point of humanity it ain't no worse than the press-gangs, so far as I can see. As a sailor born and bred, I'd sooner do double duty here than work alongside of some of the stuff the press-gangs bring aboard."

Matthew nodded, and, as he passed on, let his hand fall as though by chance on the other's shoulder, as a sign he would keep his counsel. Even if the wars were over when they got back to England, the lot of a deserter from the Navy was a dubious one. He remembered how Bowling had been always honest, and, within the limits imposed by the difference in their stations, friendly, in contrast with the sly malice of the rest of the crew, only kept in abeyance by their fear of authority: and that he had Bowling to thank for such knowledge of seamanship as he had gained on the outward voyage.

The nightly drama of the sunset was over, and a broad belt of luminosity lay upon the horizon, paling the early glimmer of the stars; the air was like silk; the sea poured past them, patched with phosphorescence that left brief splashes of silver on the rocking hull, and with a freshening of the upper air the top-gallants bellied out, lifting the old ship, that seemed to give a sigh of relief at their assistance. Matthew, leaning on the bulwarks, had not spoken for a long time.

"What's on your mind, cock?"

He turned, smiling, to evade the question.

"Among other things, I was wondering whether my young cousin William has remembered to execute a commission I left him." Had Pallas received the book? If so, she might now be thinking of him, as he was thinking of her.

"I thought you was maybe congratulating yerself on escaping from that popish wasps' nest back yonder," grunted Abiathar, sucking on the stem of his pipe. Under the tufted brows, his shrewd eyes were fixed on his companion.

"I've got nothing against the Catholics. Nor against any people sufficiently sure of their beliefs, religious or otherwise, to fight for 'em. God knows, I'd sooner have Catholic zeal than Protestant apathy. Catholics and Non-conformists have this, seemingly, in common: that they're willing to resort to persecution in support of their convictions. The Catholics persecute in the grand manner, Nonconformists in little, mean, rat-like ways. . . . I've always had a fancy, myself, for the grand manner." He shrugged the subject aside and looked down into the deep, restless water that went curling away from the bows. "Will she do it again?" he muttered.

"Do what?"

"Stand up to another crossing. It's taken the life out of her, hasn't it?"

"She's a brave ship," said Abiathar slowly, "and there's plenty of life in her yet; but if I was you, I'd put her on the Irish trade. She's worked hard, and it seems like she's earned a quiet old age— Freed from all storms, the tempest an' the rage o' billows '!"—he quoted from the verse that every old tar of Bristol knows, for it is inscribed over the doorway of the Merchant Adventurers' almshouses. "You got *Pride o' Bristol* and *Melchior* and the old

Redeemer doing the trip reg'lar—not to speak of the little *Bristol Queen*, that's the fastest ship between Seamill and the Cape Verdes. We got to face it: trade's saggin', and with four ships in the Guinea service, you'll do as well, for the present, as if you'd got a dozen. We ain't going to pick up cargoes like the last every time we go to the Coast—'specially if the *Greator* lot chooses to make themselves nasty, like they threaten, over the Omo bargain. If trade brisks up, you've only got to refit one of the others—*Bristol Belle*, or *Daylight*——”

“You'd go on the Irish passage?” Matthew interrupted him to ask. Abiathar pulled a face.

“I ain't keen on them ferry jobs. To speak plain, I never feel as if I'm afloat till I've got the deep seas under me. Still”—he muttered, looking uneasily from the corner of his eye—“it's better than kickin' yer heels along the Backs.”

“You haven't got that to consider,” frowned Matthew. “There's China. There's the East Indian trade. . . .”

“D'ye mean the leavin's of the East Indiamen?” gaped Abiathar.

“If, as you say, the slave trade's declining, we've got to look to our future interests.”

“Come now, cock, you don't quit because the ship's bilged! Accordin' to my reckoning, there's ten years o' profitable trade yet to be had out of slaving.”

There was a pause before Matthew spoke the words that seemed to be forced out of him, against the effort of his will to withhold them.

“Then others can profit; not I.”

Slowly removing the pipe from his lips, Abiathar curved his hand round his ear and leaned a little forward, as though hard of hearing.

“What's that you say?”

Matthew laughed. Indeed, he could not believe the words that he had spoken—that had been spoken through him: hardly at first connecting them with a sense of overpowering relief, as though he had vomited poison—with a new breath that filled his lungs. Something wholly outside of and unknown to himself had assumed the initiative of his actions, and with the removal of a responsibility to which he had never previously given much heed, a curious lightness settled within his spirit.

“Don't look so damned suspicious, 'Biathar. I've not turned Abolitionist. I don't see how the cotton industry, not to speak of sugar and tobacco, is to go on without the slave trade.”

“Who's suggestin' it should?” growled Abiathar, suspicious now, in earnest, where he had formerly been merely incredulous.

Matthew gripped his upper arm and thrust him towards the cabin; several of the crew were sitting on the fo'c'sle top, playing able-whackets by lantern light, and the cessation of their conversations had warned Matthew of ears pricked in their direction. With the door shut, he continued:

“I'm willing, under conditions, to ship niggers to the plantations; but not on present terms. Hark 'ee: with one-third of the slaves we carried, we could have assured each one proper breathing and living room, some sort of decency, to which, on my own observation, the nigger isn't averse. The women in particular. There's no reason why, because human beings are

being sold into bondage, they should be stripped of all the modest virtues that's in their natures!"

"And how the devil——?"

"Exactly. When we're obliged to trade in competition with our rivals, how the devil can we afford to be squeamish? The animal nature of the nigger makes it easy enough for us to look on him as an animal, so let it go at that! The argument's economically sound, but it's bloody unsatisfactory when it comes to examination."

"You seem to be answerin' yer own questions as you go on," grumbled Abiathar, who preferred actions to argument, "so there don't seem much for me to say! Slave trade's slave trade, and I flatter myself that no skipper in the Guinea service has delivered cargoes in better condition than mine. They say the pudden's proved in the eating——"

"Don't ask me for a solution. Obviously there's got to be black labour, and it's got to be brought from Africa. That's the reformer's business, and I'm a trader. Show me how to trade decently and I'll put every ship I've got at the service of the plantations. Meanwhile . . . I'm done with it. I'm damned if I'll lend my vessels to a traffic that outrages all the decency in the human race."

"You've handed me some surprises since I've known you," said Abiathar slowly, "but strike me blind if I know what to make of this one. Or what Paddy and Shergill 'ull make of it either," he added, with a touch of malice that was not lost on Matthew's ear.

"I'm prepared to buy Paddy and Shergill out, and, if they won't see my way, to re-form a company, with the controlling interest in my own hands."

"And suppose they won't sell?"

"Then they must buy me out: a thing I can't see them doing, as grandfather's holdings were one half to their quarter a-piece."

"Then," said Abiathar, after a long pause, "I suppose I'll be quitting your service."

"Why? Are you so wedded to the slave trade, you can't contemplate any other?" asked Matthew, trying to rally him.

"Wedded . . . maybe that is the word for it. In matrimony you get to know each other through an' through, an' act according. You know where the shoals are, and where to shorten sail for fear of driving on a reef."

"Yet, 'Biathar, you're not married—not, that's to say, to all intents and purposes!"

"There you have it, cock; the trade's my wife—the only one I'd never betray, for all I know her shortcomings as well as she knows mine. I've served her since the day I went to sea; I've studied her—like fellows that goes to colleges studies the sciences. Look at it one way, slaving's a science. There's many a one has failed at it, because he didn't respect its laws—as distinct as any that governs the books o' Euclid! Books never made no mark on my dunderhead, cock. But ships and slaves—it seems like I've always known 'em; they answer like dogs to a master's call."

The temporary elation had passed from Matthew, and his affection for Abiathar left him craving for some sign of sympathy, at least of understanding of the decision he had made so suddenly. Yet, in his heart, he knew it was not sudden: it had been there, growing like a seed, for many weeks.

"God's blood, you're a human being! You can't hold with that mauling and mishandling of your fellow-creatures—and all that senseless brutality of the branding and the lash!"

Abiathar's stare was blank as though he looked at a wall.

"You put me in mind, cock, of the fellow that missed the procession for lookin' at a fly on the end of his nose. All that goes on in the trade is necessary for the good of the trade," he said stubbornly. "It ain't to no one's interest to knock 'em about, because that depreciates the cargo; and as for the lash—by Christmas, them blacks have hides like rhinoceroses, and you have to remind 'em who's their masters. Look 'ee, Matthew: if it wasn't for us, the best part of 'em would be tortured to death. That's the common fate o' prisoners o' war in them savage regions."

"Wars that we foment," said Matthew coolly.

"Sure; how else 'ud you get the niggers?"

At the back of Abiathar's mind stirred a bitter regret: that he had ever gone out of his way to interest this unconscionable being in the slave trade.

"That's another problem for the reformers—among whom," said Matthew dryly, "you'll recall I don't count myself. I'm sick of slaving, and that's the truth of it. All the same, I'm not so much of a fool as not to realize what quitting the trade will mean to my future prospects. I'm not a philanthropist and I'm not a hermit; for the schemes I have in mind I want money—and, by God, I mean to have it. Until I've talked with Shergill I shan't know how this switching over is going to affect my income; I only know that, by some means or other, my losses on slave trade have got to be made up in other directions."

"You won't find Lawyer Shergill so pat with his advice on them lines!"

"Then I shall go elsewhere," was the sharp retort. "The Merchant 'Venturers will advise me—and I need only take the necessary steps to get elected to the company, of which both my father and grandfather were members; I shall hardly lack sponsors in Bristol!"

In Bristol I could be a king! Ay, but Bristol was not enough; never in Bristol could he attain the fulfilment of his ambitions. Nevertheless, the prospect of returning to his birthplace filled Matthew with an elation that was not wholly vanity. He was conscious of having gained in mental and moral stature, through the past adventure; the flashy and trivial elements of his personality, the things which were at the root of his self-distrust, that he had so often masked with self-assertion, had fallen from him, like the shrivelled husks that cover a new growth; and he was eager to test the new strength of which he was conscious against the circumstances of the life towards which he was travelling.

He might reopen Triton, and cultivate all of the Bristol shipping society that could be of service to him and increase the sum of his knowledge, which at present was negligible: when Bristol palled, there was London—but how different a London from that which offered to a flimsy adventurer, dependent on his charms and his wits for that which a man of substance could command!

And Pallas? It was not conceivable that in so circumscribed a society as that of Bristol they should not from time to time make contact. Would she find him altered? Would she regret her decision? He told himself that her regrets, even if she allowed them to be seen, would leave him unmoved: that the power of feeling where Pallas was concerned, was frozen out of him.

One can only suffer so much; now it was as though she had long been dead, and bitterness and wrath had died with her. Meeting her would be like meeting a ghost, something that belonged to a period of youth, of youthful romanticism and optimism, on which maturity looks back with a smile that is half-pity, half-scorn—seeking comfort, perhaps, in the reflection that the stuff of which such dreams are made would never have survived the wear-and-tear of day-to-day experience.

From these philosophical heights, he thought it likely he would marry. The married state, the responsibilities of a family would help to stabilize his future conduct, and to balance his ambition against the too-rash ventures he might be tempted to indulge. None of those fly-by-night London ladies to whom his youthful imagination had vaingloriously turned—making of the married state a game of cuckoldry, and mocking at the mercantile society it paid them and their husbands to cultivate. A handsome, sensible woman, not too young, but young enough to breed healthily; with good connections and some fortune of her own—enough to assure her respect for her husband's; to dress well and move well and fill with dignity the position he conferred upon her.

His mind reverted for a moment to Judith; too feather-headed, though pretty enough, to make a wife on the pattern he desired. Charlotte would have been better; but life with Charlotte would be like living on an iceberg. For the present he would keep clear of the Barbados connection, in spite of the advantages it offered. Life had a curious way of proceeding in circles; it was possible that Jonathan would renew his offer at a later date, and meanwhile he would have had time to consider, to put his English affairs in order, and to master one form of commerce before he embarked on another. He had, above all, to acquaint himself with the personnel connected with his shipping interests, to find out the people he could trust, and gradually to get rid of the others. And he had, in some way, to dispose of Shergill and Peddy, without offending either of them: a problem which had occupied many of his thoughts since leaving Cuba.

He would have liked to have had Ralph Burmester on the board of the company he thought of forming, but this was a delicate matter to approach, and it was doubtful whether Ralph would consider it. Still, matters of business came before those of sentiment. And if Pallas . . . it flashed into his mind that she might have married.

In that moment Matthew made the incredible discovery that the mere possibility of Pallas's belonging to another man was enough to fill the palms of his hands with sweat, to set the nerves jiggling at the back of his knees, to dry his mouth—in which the tongue seemed suddenly to have swollen like a sponge, and to be choking him. The instinct of murder surged up in him—murder of some man he had never seen. He thought of Pallas's body swelling with another man's child, and the veins swelled on his temples, he felt his eyes filling with blood. A bitter jealousy and wrath, that was all confused with the thought of the child he had left behind in Havana, the child that would never know its father, that its father would never know, but which stood, a small, dark shadow between him and Pallas, ran like acid over the surface of his brain, and he found himself clutching his head in his hands to prevent its splitting with an intolerable agony.

It might be—he gasped as the pain died down—that she had not married yet. Would she have the effrontery to do so, with his shadow across her threshold? The fact of his own infidelity mean nothing to him; it did not affect by one jot or tittle those parts of him that were dedicated to her. But hers could only mean both physical and spiritual betrayal of all the past—since women, at any rate, women like Pallas Burmester—give not only their bodies but their souls in marriage.

The speed they could now make to Bristol now became to him of the first importance. It seemed as though only his presence there could prevent a catastrophe that his brain reeled to contemplate.

II

During those slow weeks, when the *Cassiopeia* struggled always vaguely northwards, sometimes turned broadside to a swell that sent her rolling almost to the waterline, sometimes loitering upon an oily sea, with shrouds that hung like washing from the creaking spars under a sky argentine with heat—Matthew learnt a new power: the power of governing the mind, so that it closed like a trap upon that of which it was better not to think.

The water supply was dangerously low, the men had started to quarrel and fight over rations. Matthew came on a fellow licking the dew off the hen-coops, and another had to be put in irons, because, driven beyond common sense by the thirst that tormented every one, he drank sea water and went out of his mind. It was impossible to preserve the morale of a crew which, when not actually occupied with its duties, was fit for nothing but to lie prone in a bath of sweat; even their voices were hushed to a low, spiritless murmur, and most of them were weak with semi-starvation—the food from the galley, rancid with the heat, revolting all but the most ravenous.

Then came a day when the horizon was the colour of sulphur, with above it a band of indigo that broadened and deepened with a swiftness that Matthew's landsman's eye watched with an astonishment that left no room for apprehension or any emotion save that of simple wonderment at the miracles of atmosphere: until close behind him he heard Abiathar's roar—

"Pipe all hands on deck!" and the shrill summons of the bo'sun's pipe brought the crew tumbling from below, a moment later to swarm aloft, with eyes on the racing blackness that seemed to advance in leaps from the already invisible horizon. The *Cassiopeia* stripped herself, became a cage of rope and timber, above whose swinging meshes, bleached to bone whiteness against the indigo colour of the sky, a solid darkness fled past like a visible wind, from which was hurled the deluge of the rain.

At the same time the whole ship slanted from bows to stern: hung for a shivering second on the brink of a precipice into which she slid with a velocity that carried every piece of loose tackle forward, and precipitated the men who were struggling to batten-down the hatches against the foretop casemates; and Matthew, clinging by a stay, saw above them a solid and shining wall of green-black glass, higher than the maintop, that, as it advanced, shut out

the sick light with a curling crest that seemed to hover, to gloat upon its victims, before letting down its ponderous weight upon the doomed ship.

Before the water struck him he had time to hear the screams of the men aloft; then a blow that took the wind out of his body broke him loose from his hold, he went spinning with the wash, while his lungs filled with salt water, his ears with a shrill singing that partly deadened some distant and tremendous crash under which the whole ship shuddered as with earthquake. A terrific blow on the head partly stunned him; as he lay under the bulwarks he felt the water sucking away from him with a force that stripped the upper part of his body naked.

The *Cassiopæia*, trembling in every bone, shook herself, while the swill made cascades of her decks and poured in spouts of white foam from her ports. An eldritch tangle of rope and canvas cracked overhead and flung serpents down on the decks, and the foremast, cracked in two pieces, lolled through the stove-in bulwarks on which it had dropped, giving the ship a heavy list to starboard. Caught in the tangle of its rigging, like fish in a net, lay two dead men, who had been under the mast when it fell.

In the lull that followed, momentarily, the first onslaught of the storm, a scene of resurrection morning took place: men dragging themselves out of the scuppers, naked, or with their breeches flipped round their ankles, their hair plastered like seaweed over corpse-like faces, not a few running with blood; some could not rise for their broken limbs, having been hurled from the tops when the vessel took her plunge, or trapped by the floating tackle. One of the guns had broken loose, and, ploughing across the deck, had burst the unfortunate who was in its track like a squashed fruit against the bulwarks.

A great figure stumbled through the confusion—Abiathar, naked as God made him, yelling to the men to cut away the broken mast; but before they could obey him, the ship took a sickening swing in a half-circle, placing herself for a moment broadside to the seas, which crashed over her, flinging them all again to the decks. "God help us!" Matthew heard a whimpering voice at his elbow. "That's the helm gone—it's the end for us all!"

Exerting all of his strength that remained, Matthew made use of all available hand-hold to struggle to the wheel, where he found the steersman on the point of collapse, green, half-conscious, retching the water out of his lungs, while he strove with a broken arm and a rib whose splinters stuck out of the flesh in white saw-edges to hold the ship with her stern to the gale. Matthew's weight drove the wheel round, and, with the wind on the back of his neck, he gave a gasp of relief, wishing at the same time it were possible to release a hand to wipe off the blood that was pouring into his eyes from a deep cut that he must have received when washing along the deck. But the steersman was hardly good for anything; it was Matthew's strength alone that kept her driving away from the storm, while the sweat poured down his body—not only from the physical effort that steering entailed, but from the sheer torture of muscles which, as time went on, burned like red-hot steel, while his arms felt as though they were being dragged from the sockets.

Again and again her bows smashed down into some trough from which it seemed inconceivable she could ever rise. The steering became easier when they had cut the foremast away, but by the time Abiathar came to relieve him, Matthew had started to wonder how much longer he could possibly last out.

He went to get some clothing—it was nearly dark on the deck, where the flying tackle had been partly cleared and lashed away, and the exhausted and for the most part terrified crew had gone below, where such as were fit to move were shifting the cargo under the bo'sun's direction, and the rest were receiving what ministrations it was possible for the surgeon to give, with the ship lurching from port to starboard, shaking under each crash of the seas and swilling water like a wash-tub between-decks, where the men's quarters were situated.

Matthew found his cabin reduced practically to driftwood, carpets floating, drawers shot out and their contents scattered. He scooped water from the floor to wash the clotted blood off his face, and when he found a coat could not get his arms into the sleeves. He dragged it round his shoulders and buttoned it across his chest, and, resisting the desire to fling himself on his sodden bed, struggled out once more on deck, which was pandemonium with the howling of the gale, the screech of the rigging and the incessant crash and pound of the seas, that lifted themselves in the darkness, their white crests racing from astern like an endless flight of birds.

It was bitterly cold; he shuddered, partly with exhaustion, as he crawled back to the wheel; he sought Abiathar there, and found him with his great legs planted apart, solid and changeless as a block of stone, his head up, his hair and beard blown out dimly. Matthew reached out his hand and touched flesh that was greasy with sweat but colder than ice—colder, thought Matthew, with an irrepressible shudder, than the dead.

"Go and get some clothing on!" he roared in Abiathar's ear.

The latter took no notice; either he was deafened by the storm or scorned the suggestion. The mate came out of the darkness and touched his forelock to Matthew; together they withdrew into the shelter of the poop, where speech was possible.

"Are we going to get through?"

"Ah shudn't wonder," the mate—a north countryman—answered cautiously. "T' wind's droppin' a bit, and we ain't i' bad fettle. Can't count damage till daylight, but apart from foretop an' deck, that's sprung considerable where she worked away, I ain't sighted owt much i' the way o' trouble."

"And the cargo?" shouted Matthew.

There was a silence, before the reply came faintly back on the wind.

"Ah shudn't care to say."

The sugar, the tobacco; if those were gone, the return passage would be a dead loss. Matthew stumbled back to the wheel, at which, he reckoned, his arms were sufficiently recovered to take another turn.

Something to his surprise, Abiathar relinquished it, and once again Matthew took the agonizing tug on his shoulders. The wind was evidently sinking, although the noise of the storm had in no way abated; his task was a little easier, the *Cassiopeia* no longer evinced that terrifying disposition to swing round into the gale. She shipped at intervals seas that took Matthew to the waist, and he heard faint yells from below, as the waters poured through the sprung planks into the cuddy; but a sense of gaining control filled him with a lifting excitement. The mate remained at his side, but was too short and light to be of much service; he felt as though he were alone, in solitude and chaos, and that on him hung the lives of the ship and the men

Abiathar returned shortly, clothed, having gone the rounds of the ship, and for the rest of the night he and Matthew took short turns at the wheel; they, the mate and the bo'sun were the only souls on deck. Without comment, Matthew observed Abiathar's way of steering: how he contrived, by a sudden change of weight, by a momentary slacking of the wheel, to spare the wounded ship some of her agony. He handled it as though it were a living creature, and as though he felt its pain and loved it for its courage, and sought rather to cheer than to drive it through the darkness—which was barely thinning when the wind dropped as suddenly as it rose.

With the whitening of the dawn they found themselves racing before a rapid but steady sea empty as a desert. There was no land in sight—which drew a grunt of satisfaction from Abiathar. Handing over the wheel to Bowling, he dropped his hand heavily on Matthew's shoulder, and the pair of them stood silent, looking upwards at the ruins the storm had left.

There was not only the loss of the foremast, the rigging like a tangled ball of string and half the canvas in tatters. Two of the hatches had gone, along with the loose tackle, and the charging gun had stove in a couple of yards of the port bulwarks. The passengers' cabins were wreckage (they were carrying, to Abiathar's satisfaction, only half a dozen employees of the Royal African Company, who had rushed below at the first intimations of the storm), and the state of affairs between-decks was deplorable. The shifting of the cargo during the storm had rammed her sides, and a steady trickling of water through the sprung planks added to the three feet of bilge that slopped about the holds, striped and clotted in whorls with the muscovado that had escaped from the broken casks.

Abiathar's first course was to call a muster, which showed him he had lost nine men, two of them gunners—a serious matter in view of the distance they had still to go, and the lack of seamanship among the remainder of the crew, five of whom were wholly or partly out of action through wounds received in the storm.

The six passengers were roughly informed that they were to consider themselves from now on as part of the ship's company, and to hold themselves at the bo'sun's disposal for such tasks as he considered them capable of performing. Rum rations were served to the men who were detailed to the various works of repair—work aloft being postponed until the decks were in order and the sea steady enough to reduce the probability of further loss of life. The sailmaker was served with his bolts of canvas and the farrier and carpenter set to work to put in order the scattered contents of their shops—the former also to forge new tools in place of those that were lost.

The second mate went below to inspect and report on the cargo, and Abiathar, before turning in, to pore over his charts and to find out their distance from land. The *Cassiopæia*, like a delicate convalescent, accepted tremblingly this respite from death, and faltered before the breeze.

The storm had at least done this for them—it had replenished the fresh water supply and brought a new spirit of unity into the survivors. No more "hoisting the dipper"—and men who have faced death together are inclined towards tolerance. Notwithstanding the hard work that was exacted of them, the crew was good-tempered. The example shown by the mate, the bo'sun and Matthew, who, in spite of their night-long exertions, fell with a will upon the

labours the storm had left behind, stimulated the men, and even among the most notorious bloodsuckers there was no malingering.

Each knew, moreover, that their troubles were far from ended; that nothing but masterly handling could bring the cripple into port. The man they formerly hated as a tyrant now became to them their emblem of salvation, and Abiathar's movements were followed with almost superstitious anxiety by those who knew they had once had him to thank for their lives, and that the experience might in all likelihood be repeated.

It was not until the evening of the following day that Abiathar took Matthew into his confidence.

"There's nothing for it but to make back for Madeiry. She's wobbling like a drunken tailor with two left legs, but there's less damage below the waterline than I'd thought, and we can get enough sail on to keep her moving—at her own pace."

"Where are we?" asked Matthew.

Abiathar looked at him queerly.

"A deal too close to the Barbary coast for to be healthy. If one o' them bloody Sally-men sights us an' gives chase, we're done, cock. She's gone to gingerbread, and the first kick o' the guns 'ull break her up. For a matter o' that," he added, "we ain't got a man aboard, barrin' that pusser's talley"—the term of contempt, used for naval deserters, covered, as Matthew knew, Abiathar's liking and respect for the bo'sun—"that 'ud stand up to a shindy with the Moors. Locke, Wilkins an' Lord, that went overboard last night, was three of our best men; Grainger, that's below, has his leg broke in three places—it's coming off to-morrow, if the surgeon's got time. The rest—you could knock seven bells out of 'em, you'd never make sailors. Say the word pirate—an' they'd slip their cables at the sight of a sail!"

"Well . . . we've had luck so far."

"Maybe too much. I ain't one for croaking, but it ain't going to be ornery luck that fetches us into Madeiry; it'll be a bloody miracle," muttered Abiathar. He lifted his right fist with a gesture Matthew was long to remember, and looked at the mermaid in her net of blue. "I'd the ideer, once, that 'twas her that brought me luck."

"Stick to it. By God, we'll take the ship into Madeira if we do it by our two selves!" cried Matthew, and clapped his hand into the one that bore the mermaid. The men's eyes met, and in Abiathar's he saw, not that rollicking glare of defiance of fate and fortune that betrayed so frankly their owner's character: but a look of emptiness, even of bewilderment, that smote the optimism out of his own heart.

Everything in his mind and his body hardened with the resolution not to be cheated by God or man of the future he had planned. Abiathar turned his head quickly away.

"There's something I haven't told ye."

"Well?"

Abiathar seemed to swallow something; when he spoke it was with difficulty, as though there were an obstruction in his throat.

"The instruments . . . they're gone."

"What?"

"We've got nought to tell us where we are, cock—save the stars," said Abiathar, with a solemnity that was like the tolling of a bell.

There was a short silence, before Matthew threw up his head.

"The stars—it was by them that wanderers sailed, before man invented the compass."

Abiathar's big head came round slowly, and there was love as well as appreciation in the look he fixed on his companion.

"Ay, you're James's son, all right . . . I'll not forget last night."

"Nor I, you old villain!" Matthew burst into a honk of laughter. "God, I was never so frightened in my life!" It was a pity, he thought, that Pleydell was not there to hear his words.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

THE sound of the ship's bell roused Matthew from the first deep and lasting sleep which his strained thigh and shoulder muscles had permitted him. As his slowly awakening mind took hold on the surroundings, he was aware of a curious silence, of the absence of all the noises to which his ears had become attuned during the voyage. There was the slightest perceptible motion on the ship, and the creaking of the timbers was hushed to a murmur that mingled with an oily lapping like that of the bilge. Hoisting himself to the port, he looked out upon a pale, luminous bank of fog that ended in haze over the dark flat water, only a narrow strip of which was visible between the ship's side and the thickening of the fog. They seemed to be at a standstill; when he went out on deck there were only blurred figures and voices that seemed to have surrendered their resonance to the coiling whiteness that enveloped the ship. At intervals the bell donged out its warning to other craft that might be in the neighbourhood.

The fog lasted for twenty-two hours, during which Abiathar never left his post. Matthew came on him, with eyes red-rimmed with staring into the impenetrable blank, cheerfully gulping the contents of a pan of fu-fu—barley mixed with treacle—that Bowling had produced from the galley.

"I reckon we ain't more than two days off Madeiry, cock; maybe less. We're going to make it, after all!"

It was just before the night watch came on duty that the fog split suddenly, and a yell went up from every man on deck.

"Land!" There was a rush towards the port bow, hands pointed frantically towards the rent in the white blanket, which had started to close again almost before the cries had died down. A groan of disappointment and defeat broke from the crew as the vision was lost; their nearness to safety and danger—for where there was land there might be reefs—was reflected in each man's eyes, in the slyness of apprehension with which he eyed his neighbour, as though trying to compute the degree of the other's relief, of his fear. Nosing for a breath of air, the *Cassiopaia* came slowly round to starboard, rolling with the sheer weight of the sea that was waveless as a millpond.

"Better than your word, 'Biathar!" Matthew was starting to say, and bit the words back as the other's eye rolled on him. There was no need for him to ask the question which Abiathar answered when the others had left them alone.

"It ain't Madeiry."

"You know it—at that distance?"

"Know it? There's no need to know it. Madeiry—wherever she is in this flurry—Madeiry's on our starboard beam." He sat heavily in the single chair the cabin contained and pulled the charts towards him. "She's been drifting for the last three hours; 'tain't no good floggin' headway out of her. She'll have all she can do when the mirk lifts." He lifted his head quickly

as the bell donged out; was it echo that replied, or another bell in the distance? He leapt to his feet and flung open the cabin door. Both men held their breath to listen, and could hear only the thudding of their hearts. The fog was thicker than ever; the bulwarks were blotted out, the lanterns extinguished, and no sound but the faint uneasy creak of the ship, the lap of the water and the thin tweedle of the ship's fiddler, trying to raise the spirits of his companions in the cuddy with "Spanish Ladies," disturbed the monstrous silence, as night fell, "black as the Earl of Hell's riding boots," with Abiathar still at his post.

In the morning the fog was still there, white, glistening, barely withdrawn from the decks that were wet as from a fall of rain. The *Cassiopæia* lay as though fixed in a block of malachite. The crew was edgy, quarrelsome, and, plainly, suspicious of their surroundings. All knew they were bound for Madeira, and all had taken for granted that the land they saw was the island; the knowledge that they were leaving it astern—though the ship had not made a mile of headway in the course of the night—filled them with resentment, that turned, as the day wore on, to suspicion. Abiathar and the mate took counsel on whether to lend colour to these suspicions by ordering the decks to be stripped for action, or whether, at the risk of being taken unprepared, to preserve the morale of the crew. They decided on the latter, as there was little or nothing to be done with a shipful of frightened men, and the chances were that if they were surprised the shock of sudden action would call out qualities that would fail after a long period of suspense.

Meanwhile the fog was thinning, and the glazed surface of the water broke up into ripples that spoke of a freshening wind. It was still too thick to see more than a few yards ahead, but the *Cassiopæia* was feeling her helm, and tugged more and more to westward as her mantops puffed with the breeze. She seemed, like a human being, to feel the danger of her position, and to gather the remnants of her strength for the last effort.

A golden and gossamer-like mist was all that remained of the fog when, suddenly as though a magician's hand had conjured her upon the ocean, at less than a couple of furlongs' distance from the bows, the shape that every man dreaded was before them. It was so sudden that it made one gasp; it was more like a dream than an actuality—the towering ramparts of the Moorish corsair, stripped, like the *Cassiopæia*, of all but her topsails, that the sun painted a bright gold against the turquoise sky; no movement on her decks, so still, so silent, that she might have been asleep.

The men on the *Cassiopæia* stood gaping, almost holding their breaths, as though fearing by a sound to rouse the sleeping monster; then, with a speed and silence that was almost grotesque, each ran to his gun-station. It was as though they had been smitten dumb; not a sound was heard but the thudding of bare feet, an occasional curse as the men jostled each other, as the ropes were coiled on the deck to make receptacles for the cannon balls, as the powder barrels were rushed from the magazine (which fortunately had escaped destruction in the storm, although fully half of the powder had been soaked and was sunk), as the tampions were prised out and the linstocks charged with their slivers of tinder. One or two men who had been in action before were hastily binding their shirts or waistbands round their heads; the carpenter's mate ran along the deck, scattering sawdust—and still obtained

the fantastic silence, broken only by the officers' orders, while the *Cassionæia* faltered, swung a little southward, as though doubtful, then came round slowly, towards the enemy's broadside.

Matthew, standing beside Abiathar on the poop, saw as quickly as the latter what might have been their salvation. So little prepared the Moor appeared, that it was hard to realize the magnitude of the danger they were in.

"The devil's caught napping! Can't we get all sail on and ram 'em?" His voice, in obedience to the uncanny hush around them, was lowered to a murmur. It was like a child's playground game of tiptoeing up to the "He" and touching him on the shoulder before "He" could turn round! It was all there was of absurd, impossible and hopeless; yet he found himself playing with the rest.

"We couldn't ram a cockleshell," came the reply. "Look yonder."

The bulwarks of the Moor bristled suddenly with a dark frieze of heads, and the yell that went up from her decks came across the water like the quintessence of barbarism. It evoked from the men on the *Cassiopæia* an answering roar of defiance that was partly hysterical: a little man who had been the butt of his companions throughout the voyage for his shirking of all tasks that entailed the least element of danger, danced out on the deck and shook his clenched fist at the Moor and burst into a chattering paroxysm of rage. "Come on, ye bleedin' rogers, and I'll make yer guts into black puddin's!"—which drew faint, ironic laughter from those near enough to hear the speaker's words. The breaking of the unnatural silence had brought relief; all eyes were on Abiathar, as he stood looking towards the Moor, whose rigging suddenly swarmed with a horde of ape-like figures.

"Ram her? She's getting ready to ram us," he muttered, as the pirate shook out the vast spread of her canvas, that filled at once with the ever-quickenening breeze. Matthew was conscious of things happening at a terrific speed, and of his mind that raced to keep ahead of them. To give fight, in the circumstances, seemed madness; yet to surrender without a blow for the honour of the cause was too bitter a course to contemplate.

What heed would the savages pay, in any case, to surrender? Their methods of murder and mutilation were known to all; the chances of being held to ransom were one in five million—since the British Government was notoriously tardy in taking up the matter of its victims to this particular class of warfare. The Emperor of Morocco's demand, ten years ago, for the sum of three hundred thousand dollars ransom for the survivors of the *Litchfield* disaster still rankled, and it was more or less to be taken for granted that unless such prisoners were of high importance or value to the state they would be left, in future, to the Emperor's discretion. The pirates themselves paid high duties to the Emperor, and ransom men were invariably turned over in part settlement of these.

Abiathar turned towards Matthew, and the latter saw in his eyes the irrestrainable brightness of tears, the shamed defiance of one caught in a moment of sentiment.

"We *might* save her—by surrender . . ." The tone of his voice would not have deceived a child; it was a threat, not a plea. Matthew shook his head. He felt, in this moment, very close to Abiathar, as though they were brothers: it seemed as though he could read every thought that was in

Abiathar's mind, and that his own was equally transparent to the man who stood beside him. Abiathar had forgotten himself; he thought only of the ship, and of the bright hopes it carried—as Matthew thought only, for the present, of the fight that was to come.

He heard, with a pang of exultation, Abiathar give the last order he was ever to give on the *Cassiopeia*, and followed him as he leapt from the poop—the pair of them jerking out the pistols which, for the last twelve hours, they had carried in their belts. Then the salvo of the cannon seemed to blow out his ear-drums and he staggered with the rock of the ship as the guns kicked back on their carriages. A thick volume of acrid smoke blotted out the enemy and drifted away to westward, and before it had cleared away the bows of the Moor were over their port beam.

The *Cassiopeia* cracked like an eggshell as the pirate drove into her, but the very force of the impact kept her, at first, from sinking; there she was, impaled like a bird on the spit, her rigging entangled in that of the enemy, that hurled themselves over their own bulwarks to fall on the crew that they outnumbered by six to one.

Deserting the useless guns, the men defended themselves as best they could with cutlasses and pistols, but the wiliness and strength of the Moors, the savagery of their attack to which their yells contributed the maximum of horror, gave them quick advantage over the demoralized Englishmen. The head of the surgeon lay in the scuppers, with a look of ludicrous astonishment in its wide eyes, its gaping jaws. The deck was slippery with blood and littered with human fragments over which the men stumbled as they struggled to escape, followed by the Moors, who chased them through the hatches to destroy them in the holds.

Matthew, Abiathar, the mate and Bowling fought shoulder to shoulder, the size and weight of the two former acting as protection to the shorter men. Their ammunition was exhausted, but a savage fury directed each sweep of the cutlass Matthew had seized from a dead man, and they were slowly driving their way towards the bulwarks, which, in the case of the *Cassiopeia*, were a little higher than those of the enemy. Each knew the thought in the other's mind: to board the Moor, if it were possible, and to make some attempt to seize her. It was a crazy ambition; yet to each it seemed not impossible of achievement. The mate had taken a cut in the thigh, and was weakening through loss of blood, but the other three had not, so far, received a scratch. Abiathar, a cutlass in either hand, seemed untouchable; his reach was twice that of an ordinary-sized man, and the Moors showed their fear of him by their skill in keeping out of his reach. Slow-moving, he claimed fewer victims than the more agile Matthew, whose forward sallies resulted each time in the yelling retreat of the enemy, who, by now, met with hardly any resistance from the almost exterminated crew.

The sun, however, blazed in their eyes, and made it difficult to see. Matthew saw Bowling stoop suddenly and cut a man's legs from under him with a scythe-like sweep of his blade; the sight of the fellow dropping abruptly at the side of his severed limbs was so ludicrous that Matthew was not surprised to hear a laugh, and did not know it had come from his own lips.

"Keep watch above!" yelled the mate. "The bastards 're swarming the rigging!"

A grinning figure with the cutlass between its teeth was working out along the yard, almost immediately above their heads. Abiathar stooped slowly, and seizing a small cannon-ball that had rolled from one of the untouched piles, hurled it with all his force at the man, who crashed, with his skull split like a coco-nut, almost across Bowling's shoulders. Unhappily, this ingenious manœuvre recommended itself to the Moors, who instantly started to fling at the four men they dared not approach a hail of cannon-balls—their aim, fortunately, being so poor and the power of their muscles so indifferent that it was not difficult to dodge the missiles. Matthew, however, received one on his cheekbone, that was broken in. "A damn good thing it wasn't my nose," he remembered thinking, as he spat the blood out of his mouth.

With a movement as calm as that of a cricketer on the village green, Abiathar launched another cannon-ball at a man who had started to swarm the mast; it caught him in the spine and he dropped with a howl. Bowling and the mate accounted, by a rash sortie, for two more, and the yelling horde that confronted the four Englishmen had dwindled to a little more than a score. They did not, however, regard this as any sign of victory; there were at least as many Moors below, fighting to salve the cargo that was already partly inundated by the rush of water through the breach in the *Cassiopeia's* side.

The weight of the waterlogged ship was bearing down on the pirate's bows, that were heavily tipped forward. Matthew and Bowling were on one side. Abiathar and the mate on the other of the V-shaped split in the deck, whose sprung and splintered planks made risky footing, and they could hear the shout of the pirate's helmsman, to warn his fellows that they could not hold their position much longer. The members of the crew who had been left on board were busy getting out the boats, that Matthew guessed were to receive as much of the cargo as the pillagers could put overboard, and already the *Cassiopeia* was yawing away from her precarious support, was belching forth those ominous noises that a ship gives when she is preparing to settle. The four could see the dark water rising below them, almost to the level on which they stood, and the distance between their deck and the pirate's bulwarks was too wide for a stride.

With a mutter of warning, Abiathar took a quick look behind him and leapt, followed by the mate, who unhappily, through the weakness of his wound, failed to cover the gap. As he leapt, Matthew heard the hollow and lonely cry with which he dropped to his doom, and sickened: the mate was a brave fellow, who had stood nobly by his captain from the beginning of the voyage. Bowling landed with a stumble that nearly took Matthew off his feet, righted himself quickly, and the pair of them ran forward to support Abiathar, who had rushed at the men who were launching the boats. It was extraordinary, Matthew thought, as he threw himself into the new affray, how much difference the absence of one man made to their slender chances. But let them once get the helm, and they might yet be saved!

The boats left swinging a-cock-bill on the davits, the screaming Moors turned upon their assailants. It was evident they had expected no such attack, for, in place of cutlasses, they had only the short curved knives that were stuck in their loincloths with which to defend themselves. Meanwhile, there was chaos on the *Cassiopeia*; the men left behind had likewise expected no

such action on the part of their victims, and one of those incredible incidents which might have given Matthew and Abiathar the victory had taken place. The already rotted deck had fallen in round the pirate's bows, and a gap of at least six feet held off the boarders, who clustered along the bulwarks yelling for the boats that dangled useless in the rigging of their own ship.

While the pirate broke loose and slowly assumed her proper level, the stranded men went swarming into the rigging, from which they could drop on their own deck—which a few of them succeeded in doing; but the helmsman, fearful of being caught in the down-tug of the sinking ship, put the helm about, and with a frightful rending of shrouds, which were tangled in those of the *Cassiopæia*, she swung aside.

The three men continued to fight their way towards the wheel—a manœuvre the Moors thoroughly appreciated, and flung all their efforts into defeating. But there was something fearful—something that struck horror to their superstitious souls—in the slow advance of the three: the red giant with eyes fixed like blue glass in the beast-like tangle of hair and beard, and the black giant with arms like flails and white teeth set in a perpetual grin—not to mention the little one, who seemed like a devil to wave himself round and through the others, so that his limbs were added to theirs that made a twelve-pointed octopus with tentacles of steel.

They clustered howling between Abiathar and the helmsman as the former lunged forward, then, parting suddenly, let the force of his rush carry him forward into the hatchway their bodies had hidden.

Matthew heard the crash below, and knew it was the end. The Moors were closing in on him and he slashed out blindly, caring no longer for anything save to destroy as many as possible before sharing Abiathar's fate. He had lost sight of Bowling, and supposed him to have fallen victim to the enemy. He was almost over the hatch—they were driving him into it—when a missile flung from below struck him in the face. Momentarily checked, he gasped, staggered, and his foot crushed something that sent a shock through every nerve of his body. There was no need to look down—although he did so involuntarily—at the dismembered hand, at the mermaid, still smiling, wide-lashed, in her net of blue. He felt consciousness ebbing on a wave of nausea, he felt himself falling—falling . . .

II

The *Cassiopæia* gave a sigh; her bowels ached with the drag of the waters and the last call of a tired ship sang in her shrouds. Slowly, delicately, she lowered her poop, and her breastworks lifted in their last salute to the sun. The crusted keel, like an antediluvian monster, hung for a moment dripping over its own shadow, while the Moors, with screams of terror, hurled themselves recklessly into the water and began to swim with all their power away from the zone of danger. The last man had hardly left the rigging when she rose perpendicular to the waves, and, with a movement so swift as to be almost incredible to the watchers, slid from sight, leaving only the suck and eddy of her submersion to witness to her lonely end.

The corsair rolled as in a tempest, while down through the glaucous depths

slipped the brave ship to its rest among the pale forests that none but the dead know.

III

In black darkness Matthew opened his eyes and jerked his head aside; an animal as heavy and seemingly as big as a cat leapt from his chest and scampered away in the blackness. A rat. The corner of his lower lip was sore and there was the taste of blood on his tongue; the creature had been gnawing at his mouth. With a shudder of disgust Matthew tried to lift his hand to the sore place, and found he could not. Both arms were stretched out at right angles to his body and both pinioned. A cautious effort to move his legs proved that they had been treated in the same fashion. Various areas of discomfort in his body suggested that he was lying across the ribs of the ship's bottom; there was a suffocating stench of bilge, and, as he lay there, with consciousness and memory slowly invading the void from which they had been driven, an icy wash swamped his lower parts, then, with the rolling of the ship, sucked back, dragging the weight of his body on his imprisoned wrists with an excruciating pain of galled flesh. He bit on the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from groaning aloud, and found himself choking on a great lump of splintered bone and swelling that forced his tongue awry and crippled his powers of speech.

A claustrophobic horror of his surroundings—of the bilge and the rats—seized him with such violence that he dragged wildly on his fetters, but pain added to helplessness restored his common sense. There was absolutely nothing to be done. He lay there, forcing himself to be quiet, to listen to noises, to try to relate them to their probable sources, and otherwise to render his mind a blank. It was too like a nightmare to be true—this confined sensation, that was increased by the feeling that there were only a few inches of space between his face and the planking overhead. It occurred to him that he might be able to prove the truth of this conjecture by speaking or calling out; that the quality of the sound would surely prove to him if the roof were as low as it felt in the dark to be. Yet a dread of calling attention to himself prevented his making the experiment; if his captors heard, they might resort to some new and ingenious form of torture that his already tormented body could not endure. Supposing he were not alone? Supposing—Abiathar!

His heart gave a great leap, then seemed to stop. Abiathar? And the bo'sun, Bowling? A voice broke from him that was unrecognizable as the syllables formed by his swollen lips.

There was a faint, creaking whisper. The blood drumming in his ears, his heart pounding as he held his breath, he dared not at first take it for an answer: it might be the slither of a rope-end, the scuffle of a rat. He waited until his lungs were bursting, then once again sent out that monstrous, that inhuman sound.

"Here—here," came the answer, this time unmistakably.

"Biathar!" Could the other recognize his name in that form, shapeless as an animal's howl?

"No—Bowling."

"Bowling. Bowling. Where's the captain?"

No answer.

"Where are you?" He had to say it three times before the dreadful rustle of a voice replied.

"Thirsty. No water for three days."

Three days! And this, so far as consciousness went, was his first.

Shortly after this blankness again blotted out Matthew's present. Save for short, swimmy periods, when the deadness of his lower limbs made him wonder whether his legs had been cut off at the hips, he had no knowledge of the passage of time; his jaw was so stiffened as to make speech impossible. Save for a grunt he could make no sort of sound, and as no answer came to his grunts he concluded that Bowling was dead. Death seemed a rational thing; he wondered vaguely why he was not dead, thought that he might be without knowing it, and spun off into the next patch of oblivion. His eyes remained open, and once or twice it seemed as though a kind of pale square opened above his face. Once there were crashing noises that amounted to physical pain. Once he awoke to find himself slumped up against some long, hard object that had not been there before, and once he had a kind of dizzying dream in which there seemed to be a rope round his body and he was being hoisted up and up like a sack of flour and then allowed to fall again.

He awakened eventually—and threw his hand across his face to shut out a blinding light. Cringing from the light, it only struck him later that his hand had been free to perform this action. Not daring at once to deprive himself of the shade, he spread his fingers a little, finding them stuck together and almost too stiff, or too weak—he was not sure which—to separate. A dull twilight seeped between his fingers, and as his eyes gradually accustomed themselves to it, he cautiously lowered his hand and touched his body, feeling the hard stuff of his garments, stiff as leather and stickily dank with seawater.

For a long time his hand, like an explorer, roved about his body, as though making fresh acquaintance of that which it had long forgotten; raised itself with difficulty to touch his head, on which the hair felt like dried mud, found his chest, his shoulders, his face—of which only the left side seemed to answer to its recollections of what a face should be: the right flattened where it should have been full, and rocky where there should have been softness.

Suddenly the wandering hand found its fellow and clung desperately, as to a fellow soul. He felt, as at a distance, that strange reunion of his hands: felt the life flutter between them, like a suddenly reviving bird, felt it spreading—reaching towards him, reviving, warming. . . .

Bowling was looking at him; Bowling, sitting on his haunches two or three yards away. Matthew gaped as his eyes took in the first sight of a human being he had seen since—it seemed since a century ago. Nor was he certain for a moment or two that it was Bowling—this emaciated creature with the patchy stubble of a beard that clung round the square promontory of his jaw. Bowling had some kind of infection of the blood that resulted in an unequal pigmentation of the skin; between the sun-blackened areas there were patches of almost snow-white flesh that gave him the piebald appearance of a fawn, and on these livid patches no hair would grow; it was this peculiarity

that informed Matthew he was looking at Bowling, whom he had never thought to see again.

Bowling was smiling, was pushing towards him a tin basin that contained the remains of a mess of food. He could only push it so far, because his legs were in irons, which Matthew discovered his own to be also. A dipper of water stood midway between them; rolling over, Matthew seized it and poured its contents into his parched mouth, not caring how much was spilt in the process. He found difficulty in swallowing, because of his broken face, but the cool drops were paradise on his tongue. He found he could speak, indistinctly, but more clearly than before, and he found that the walls which enclosed them, that rose to a dizzy height and were pierced above the height of a tall man's head with narrow slots through which the daylight fell obliquely, were not of wood, but of stone.

END OF BOOK II

La Rochelle, June, 1939.

BRISTOL INTERLUDE

I

LADY EDWARD SAX, reclining on the stuffed satin couch of her boudoir, reflected on what an uncomfortable and inconvenient procedure it was to have a baby. Then she told herself to be a good girl: to remember how lucky she was—with an adoring husband prepared to gratify her lightest whim; with a London house and a country mansion—at the present moment she would much have preferred to be at the former, for the season was in full swing; but family insistence, her husband's, no less than her own, installed her at Paragon. It was no light matter to put an heir to the Saxes into the world. But she was not going to put up with this all the time!

So, to comfort her, she had her sister's company, and among the innocent amusements they devised for their diversion, there was none, for Orabella, more provoking than that of watching the calm, regal figure of Pallas, moving in surroundings that she graced—at least in her sister's opinion—more fully than their rightful châtelaine.

"Truly, Pally, I tell Edward he ought to have married both of us! For, though I flatter myself I cut a very good figure in London, I have not the mien for Paragon and its Corinthian grandeurs. Now, when I see you on the great staircase, or walking on the terrace, it is as though the architect who planned them invented you at the same time, or built Paragon with you in mind. You belong to the same period, the same model, the same scale——"

"Pon my soul, Orry, I won't be made out a monstrosity! The same period, the same scale, indeed! I'm not a Titaness, and, elderly as I may be I refuse to be counted as a contemporary of Queen Anne!" The deep voice had a certain dry humour in it. Pallas turned the frosted beauty of her profile—a profile too set, yet exquisite in its immobility, for her years—from the daffodil twilight that streamed through the arched windows with their opulent draperies of satin. Twilight, the most wistful hour of the day, the hour when she had most need of the control she had learned to impose on herself.

The hour of lovers. Presently she would play the spinet, while Edward Sax, returned from his shooting party, and thirsty for the pleasures of love, reclined and murmured with his young wife; their soft laughter, sometimes the sound of their kisses, threaded the music; no matter how hard she struck the notes—and the quivering twang of the fragile wires sounded to Pallas, on such occasions, like the outraged cords of her breaking heart—those sounds came through.

It was not easy to be calm, to keep an even rhythm, to strike the harmonious chord; always to wear a smile, always to conceal the anguish that rose at the spectacle of Orry's happiness. There were days when the effort made her ache in body and soul, when she fought against the cowardly impulse to flee from her torment, back to the family in Bristol. Yet, when Lydia, suffering in her knowledge of what went on in her elder daughter's heart, wrote, suggesting her return, Pallas replied, almost with indignation:

"What would Orry do now, without my help, Mama? If only to spare her some of her social duties, she needs me almost every hour of the day."

As she looked upon the pouting figure, throned on its tasselled couch, she smiled to think how completely Orabella had won her battle against the snobbery of her husband's family. It would be a bold individual—or an excessively foolish one—who now attempted to patronize Lady Edward Sax. In place of childish loveliness there was the calm security of the woman who is assured of her position; the calm that comes from love triumphant and fulfilled, from the total absence of material cares. Even nature forbore to lay her cruel finger on this child of fortune; pregnancy, instead of blurring, had heightened Orabella's beauty of rose and gold, and, by slowing the tempo of her movements, had conferred a dignity formerly a little lacking in one lovingly named by her adorer "Euphrosyne." Yes, it was easy to see Orabella as the "Goddess fair and free . . . Whom lovely Venus, at a birth . . . to Ivy-crownéd Bacchus bore."

"And Mama certainly fills the rôle of 'lovely Venus.'"

"What about Papa as 'ivy-crownéd Bacchus'?"

"A trifle too gentlemanly, do you think?"

They rocked with laughter, for all the world as though they were back in the schoolroom in Park Street, with the formidable Misses More out of the way. A footman entered, ignored with the aloofness of life-long training the two laughing ladies, mended the fire and withdrew. Orabella, by now helpless with laughter, dried her streaming eyes.

"And not so much as a Milady for you! You remember when I was terrified of the servants? Now I never notice the creatures—except when my looking-glass isn't polished or the wood boxes are empty. It's a mercy I don't have to play the housekeeper; indeed, who could housekeep in a place like this, which is nearly the size of Blenheim Palace?"

"It is far more beautiful than Blenheim. Blenheim is vulgar—sprawling in its park like a parvenu schoolboy showing off before his companions!"

"Gracious, Pally, I hope you didn't say that to His Grace of Marlborough. Edward's very touchy about his Churchill connections." Orabella shifted uneasily on her couch. "Oh dear, the coming generation is very troublesome this afternoon!"

As Pallas made some little adjustments for her sister's comfort, she recovered her usual sweet temper to laugh up in the elder girl's face.

"So long as it's a boy I shan't say a word! But if it's just a tiresome miss, giving me all this trouble and inconvenience, I'll box her ears!"

"No, you won't; you'll christen her Pallas and worship the ground she treads on: for she'll have all your and my and Mama's and Edward's good looks combined in one, and our small successes will vanish in the havoc spread by one flick of her eyelashes."

"Oh, that won't suit me at all," frowned Orabella. "I have no mind to be cut out by a daughter, and I've got enough to do without playing chaperone to a chit who sets her cap at all my admirers. No, Pally; do you hear, it *must* be a son." A crimson spot burned on either cheek. "I've put up with a lot—you know. But if I produce a son they'll never be able to say another word against me. An heir for Sax, an heir for Paragon; God, I've heard nothing else since they knew I was pregnant. It would be fun to cheat them with a

girl: only, Pally, I could never love a girl, like that. It's got to be a boy—with perhaps my eyes and Edward's funny, handsome mouth."

"A boy to bring up, loving Paragon; knowing every line of its history and each stone that went to build its terraces," said Pallas quietly. "You're right, Orry; it must be a boy. I think you owe them that."

She had gone back to the window, and her gaze took in the wide sweep of park and paddock, the crested elms whose considered placing enhanced the beauty of the scene, the clear river which fed the little ornamental ponds and their fountains, and the white glimpses of little Palladian temples, where the family and their guests held *fêtes-champêtres* in the summer—now gilded with the falling gold of autumn. Beneath that velvet turf the pastoral heart of England beat out its changeless rhythm, linked past to present, revived in each blade of grass memories of the generations that had governed it. Edward's and Orry's children, playing with the ghosts of little Stuarts, little Tudors, little Hanoverians, dancing across the dappled lawns: dancing on her bruised heart. . . .

"Pally——" The younger girl caught her breath. There were so many words that rushed to her lips, and that had to be held back; for, in the last few years, she had learned an awe of Pallas that was almost fear: an awe that based itself on respect for the character that, asking no pity and acknowledging none, accumulated dignity from year to year. When the name of Matthew was spoken—as it not infrequently was, for Pallas would brook no concession to her susceptibilities—it was Orabella, not Pallas, who winced.

"Are you *always* going on doing it?"

"Going on doing what?"

"You know what I mean; making men fall in love with you, and scorning their advances?"

Pallas turned her graceful head, her beautiful, empty eyes, towards her sister.

"I never in my life scorned a living soul; and, if you must know, it's over twelve months since any one proposed to me. I am very glad; I hope there'll be no more."

"It's the wickedest waste!" blurted Orabella. "And now we know Matthew is dead——" She clasped her hand to her lips, horrified by the sound of the words.

"Who knows?"

"Now, Pally!" Orabella swung her feet to the ground, and stood up in her leaf-sprayed bedgown of green and white, a Botticellian Primavera, moulded by the thin material to vase-like form. "It used to be always you who talked common sense to me; but now it is my turn!"

"Please, Orry——"

"Never mind 'Please, Orry.' Do you think Amelia and Michal Flood would waste money on mourning unless they were obliged to do it? Even they hadn't the impudence to wear those skimpy rags they had for their father's funeral to the memorial service at the Cathedral! And a hundred Bristol families in black! Not a word, not a trace of the ship since she left Havana, nearly eighteen months ago! Pally, my darling, what sense is there in hoping——?"

"Hoping? I do not hope," said Pallas. "What should I have to hope

for? If Matthew returns, what difference can it make to him, or to me? I loved him—once; and that love is gone, with the one who called it forth. The Matthew who went away wasn't my love——"

"Are you raving?"

"Indeed I'm not. I don't know how to explain it to you, Orry; but my Matthew is dead. If there is still a Matthew living, it isn't my own dear love, and though I pray God he may have been spared from the dreadful death of the ocean, I do not care if he never comes back to me."

"Of course," mumbled Orabella, "you will end up by breaking my heart." She flung herself back on the couch. "How do you think I should have borne all this tragic business, if I hadn't made up my mind that, like the fairy tales, it would all come right in the end? Matthew would return, and give up slaving, and you would live happily ever after at Triton Lodge, and have dozens of children——"

"What a romantic you are!"

"Well, if you're bent on being stubborn, it's a very good thing Papa is well off and can make proper provision for you. I suppose he'll leave you all his money—la, Pally, you'll be fabulously wealthy, and I suppose you'll spend it all on your silly charities. If I wasn't so fond of you I could smack you!"

"You may at least as well wait till I've carried out your prophecy!" smiled Pallas.

"Oh, I know you!—and it's like Papa's luck to start making silk just before they put the ban on the importation of foreign textiles. You must tell him to send me some patterns, Pally—I shall be needing at least a dozen dresses after young Master Sax arrives." Volatile as ever, Orabella set her head aside to survey her sister's gown. "That dress is vastly elegant, but I'm not sure it's not a little elderly. I prefer you in brighter colours."

"You'd prefer me decked out like a maypole! I feel—I don't know why—I feel more at home, these days, in quieter tones. Perhaps it's the coming winter."

"Don't; you make me shiver. How I hate the cold, dark months—I'd go mad if we had to spend them at Paragon. You may give me credit for good management, in arranging for the baby to be born in time to let us winter in town! I wonder who'll take Mrs. Cibber's place this season? I never saw anything so delightful as her 'Provok'd Wife'—and they say her funeral at the Abbey was quite a social occasion." A silvery chime from the little Sèvres clock on the chimney-piece made her start. "What, is it five o'clock? Edward will be in!" Her voice rang with the warm delight of the young bride, too long separated from her lover. "Fetch me my powder and glass, Pally, please! And ring for the candles—candlelight becomes me better than the day."

II

Lawyer Shergill bit his thumbnail and looked his partner, Mr. John Peddy, in the eye.

"So that's how we stand at present. A ship to the bad—and the usual

argument with underwriters a-brewing. We're out of luck, Jack. It was bad losing Hercules—when you get to our age you don't care to have your old friends drop away; and there was many of the younger ones that 'ud have been better spared than young Matthew. He had his vices, but they was good, solid, old-fashioned ones; the niminy-piminy youngsters of to-day know nought about living on the grand scale. Ay, well——” He rose and lumbered across the room to where, as usual, a pot of glue was bubbling over the fire, gave it a turn or two with a wooden chip, and returned to add: “If I was superstitious, I'd say there was a curse on Floods. James lost at sea, Jason come to an unnatural end, and now the young 'un goes seeking James's bones through Davy Jones's locker.”

Peddy shifted uneasily and lifted the tankard with an unsteady hand. Shergill might dismiss superstition; he, Peddy, was full of it, and faced its implications a dozen times a day.

“You've got a nice job ahead of you, anyhow,” he mumbled. “Conveyancing that lot for the second time inside four years. Your pockets 'ull be downy, Tom—at any rate, downier than mine; for I don't flatter me the 'surance 'ull cover my losses on *Cassiopæia*.”

“Nor mine,” agreed the other. “As for getting it back in fees—I don't see their lordships giving leave to presume death for another twelve months, if then. This side of next year's end, who knows what may happen?”

“Does the widow come in for anything?”

“What widow?” Shergill squinted across the table at his companion.

“Plague take it, Jason's wife! I been thinking, once Ann Flood gets her fingers on the money that slipped out of 'em the first time, she'll make sure of her crown o' glory by subsidizing our enemies!”

“Where does Ann Flood come into it?” Shergill looked puzzled.

“Ain't she the next of kin? And if Matthew died intestate——”

“Next of kin!” The lawyer chuckled at this display of lay ignorance. “She ain't even a Flood! And what about Jonathan in Barbados? His precious Rice, Jernigan and Grylls were on to it, the minute the loss was posted.”

“I'd forgot Jonathan. Well, I'll forgive him his luck, for he ain't in the enemy's camp, at any rate—like that”—Peddy's description of Ann Flood would have convinced the Queen Square family of his ultimate damnation. “Hark 'ee, Tom: something's got to be done, and sharp at that, about these pestering anti-slavers. They're getting a deal too much notice in this part o' the world. You know they lost me a cargo last week?”

“How was that?”

“I had it fixed with Morland's to ship a big consignment of goods for the Cape. He called on me this morning, having a long face on, to cry the business off: having, if you please, had notice from Brodrick and Sons, with whom he's done business for twenty years, that they cancel further dealings if he continues to ship their goods by the slave routes on slaving vessels.”

“Are you daft?” gaped Shergill.

“Not I: though I shall be, if this sort of thing continues. Damme, Tom, if things weren't so slack we could sit back and laugh at 'em; but here's over thirty ships laid up now, whistling for cargoes.”

“Ay, I've just seen through it.” Shergill pursed his lips and expelled a

sharp breath. "Brodrick's married for the second time, with a Miss Woolman of Philadelphia: rich American Quaker family, ain't it? I never cared for American women—a drivin' lot. You're right, Jack; that's nasty news—the canker right in our midst." They stared at each other, each recalling something which had caused them amusement at the time: that in 1761 the Society of Friends had proclaimed the edict which expelled from their ranks all who should be found concerned, whether directly or indirectly, in the slave trade.

"With our wives and our daughters playing traitor to us, we're going to be scuppered, Tom, unless we take active means to stop the poison spreading."

"Ay," said Shergill reflectively; he paused to dab a bead of gum on the truck he was repairing. "When it comes to plain fact, the women rule the roost: an unpleasant reflection, but one we can't afford to ignore. Maybe we've all been too casual about anti-slavery; it seemed there wasn't any harm letting the women wag their tongues and parade their pretty sentiments . . . which reminds me. I heard another yarn t'other day, to which I'd hardly have paid attention but for what you tell me about Brodrick's. Maybe I'd better look into it."

"What tale's that?" The anxiety in Peddy's voice was undisguised, for although the Quaker element in England was not sufficiently numerous or widespread seriously to influence public opinion, and well-informed people smiled at the suggestion, whispered in some quarters, of the projected formation of a society of Abolitionists, straws show which way the wind blows; and Peddy would not have been the successful man he was had he neglected to take notice of straws.

"I was told Ralph Burmester's their latest proselyte. 'Tis hardly believable, I'll admit; but if it's true, we know who's at the back of it."

"That lamp-post of a girl!"

"Come now, Jack!" Shergill's thick lips twisted into a smile. "One of the few subjects on which we've never disagreed is the beauty of Pally Burmester, and I wager these are bad times for the poor soul; for whatever folks may say, she loved Matthew and no other. 'Twas nought but her own mulishness sent him away."

"Curse her and her mulishness!" exploded Peddy. "If her mulishness has turned Burmester into one of them Creepin' Jesuses—by God, Tom, this is serious! Burmester's in with all the big crowd, and may God help us if he starts reforming 'em!"

"If Burmester's got conversion—and, mind ye, he was half-way to it: his mother was a Quakeress, and his father had to join the S'iety to marry her: only after she died he dropped back into heathen ways!—it's only to please Pally, who's the apple of his eye—and do you wonder? Egad, if I'd got a daughter like that, I'd turn Buddhist to please her. But I've enough confidence in his good will to old friends to be sure he'll not start poking his finger into inconvenient places."

"Are ye so sure he looks on us as friends? Since that pother up at Hercules' he's been short with all of us—Fordyce was remarking the same thing t'other day. And, talking o' that—when Madame Burmester was took sick last week, 'twasn't Fordyce was called in, but a fellow from Bath. They say 'twas her ladyship's doing, but Fordyce has taken mighty umbrage, as

you can imagine. If I was you, Tom, I wouldn't bank on Burmester's friendship; after all, he ain't a Bristol man."

"I'll have a chat with him, and find out how the wind blows. He ought to be in good humour, since his pretty chit captured her peer. 'Tis but a courtesy title, but there's a marquissate in the family, and not so far removed that Orry's not likely to be a marchioness one day. Pity it wasn't Pally; she'd look like the Queen of Sheba, with a coronet on her handsome head."

"Good humour! More likely too big for his boots," grunted Peddy, who had had enough to bear from his wife on the subject of Orabella Burmester's marriage. "'Tis like that scheming Lyddie Burmester to secure a titled son-in-law! And here's Clara, pestering me about that Wardell fellow, that's no better than a common builder, and you, that could put a stop to it all, don't give me a bit of help!"

Peddy had never forgiven Pallas her ill-timed invasion of the *Cassiopeia*, and his dislike of the elder Miss Burmester had gradually spread to the rest of her family; for he was by nature a jealous man and disliked the evidences of a prosperity that threatened to eclipse his own.

"You've heard about the amalgamation of Burmester's with the Maryport mills? If prohibition of imported silks comes in, he'll be rolling; next thing he'll be standing for Parliament, and his damned party'll have their foot into the Government——"

"Be off with you and your gloomy prognostications," said Shergill easily. "You take too much notice of old maid's clack, Jack. There'll never be an anti-slavery society and there'll never be abolition; you can set your mind at rest on that. Where'd England be without her West Indian plantations? Answer me that, and you've got the answer to all your worries. As for Mr. Sanctimonious Brodrick and his wife, you'll see, the laugh will be on your side in the end."

"It's all very well for you to take it like that; shipping ain't all your means of livelihood," muttered Peddy.

"Nor is it yours," pointed out Shergill; he poked the other in the ribs. "Why don't you retire, Jack? I'll wager you've got a nice, cosy income awaiting your days of leisure!"

While Peddy expressed his sulphuric opinion of this kind suggestion, Shergill, shaking with laughter, bent over his task.

"I've got this pretty job to finish, and then it'll be time to spruce ourselves up for the Cathedral. I've already been called on by one fellow who wants the job of setting up the commemorative tablet in the Redcliff! But I warned him 'twasn't wise to be premature." He shook his gross laughter over the fragile rigging of the model he steadied in his hand.

It was twelve months, almost to the day, that Shergill's prediction of "anything happening" came true in so startling a fashion as to be, at the outset, hardly credible to those it concerned; and a week or two later that Miss Pallas Burmester came riding home from Watford with a ghost for company.

III

Pallas was terribly tired; so tired that she could hardly keep her swaying body upright in the mailcoach that jolted its way over the uneven Hertfordshire roads; so tired that she did not attempt to restrain the tears that rolled steadily down her cheeks, from the inexhaustible well of her sorrows.

On the opposite seat sat Betty the maid and a little girl of seven or eight, both of them asleep, the child's head pillowed on the servant's lap. Still four hours to go before they reached London. The riders in the coach already felt they had reached the limits of endurance. It was something that they were alone; the rest of the passengers had got off at the last stage; probably at the next they would pick up more. There was, at any rate for the present, enough privacy for Pallas to draw from her travelling bag a folded page whose few faded lines she had no need to read, for she knew them by heart.

"Pallas. There is a child called Fanny Pilgrim whom I want you to find. She lives in Watford. She is the daughter of my friend, who was killed at my side to-day, in the forest. Matthew.

That sleeping child, curled up in Pallas's own pelisse, for she had nothing of her own that was fit to wear, and there had been no time for shopping in the little market town, was Fanny Pilgrim, daughter of Matthew's companion on his journey up the African river.

Pallas had taken two days over the search, even in the tiny town of Watford, where the tall, commanding figure of an unknown lady and the soft, West-Country drawl of her rosy attendant had roused much curiosity, before running her quarry to earth in a miserable slum—to which, however, the child seemed so much addicted that it took all Pallas's patience and Betty's homely persuasion to induce her to come away with them. A sluttish foster-mother was placated with a few shillings; too drunk to know properly what she was doing, she placed a low value on Fanny, and they succeeded at last in getting the little creature to the inn where they were staying, where Betty washed and neatened her, while Pallas went to find out where seats might be reserved for the return journey by coach.

... She was so weary, when the hackney carriage she had taken from the posting station in Piccadilly drew up in St. James's Square that she could barely stumble up the steps, on either side of which the torches flared in their sockets of wrought iron. The great doors swung open upon the pale brilliance of a candle-lighted hall, and it seemed utterly unreal when her father stepped quickly forward to clasp her in his arms. He was so pale that she had instant premonition of calamity.

"Mama——?" was her first word, but he shook his head, tenderly pushing back the travelling hood from her ruffled hair. He would not burden her, in this moment of meeting, with reproaches for the tremendous shock he had suffered on arrival, to find that Pallas, supposed to be staying with her sister, was not there to receive him.

"Nothing—at least, nothing that is wrong," he assured her; but she felt his relief pouring over her, and guessed the degree of his hurt, in finding that she had deceived him.

"And now perhaps you will forgive me, Papa," Orabella was crying across his shoulder, "for not having your precious Pally on the doorstep to welcome you!"

She came forward to kiss her sister; the soft warmth of her cheek, the perfumed delicacy of the materials in which she was folded, were themselves like a caress.

"Though to be sure it's the first time I've been expected to be my sister's keeper! And this is Fanny. Well, Fanny, I hope you are going to be a good girl and like your new home. Take her away, Betty; give her her supper and put her to bed. And not a word, you others! I forbid it, until Pallas has taken off her travelling dress and had something hot to eat."

Very much the matron was Orry, since the birth of her son; firm, proud and sure of herself, accustomed to giving orders and to being obeyed. With her arm round her sister's waist, she drew her upstairs, while Edward Sax and his father-in-law went into one of the drawing-rooms to wait for the ladies. There was an odd resemblance between the two men: a resemblance which each felt, without being precisely aware of it. It was perhaps no more than an outward reflection of the deep personal sympathy which existed between two beings of utterly different tradition and upbringing, the disparity of age between them not being so great (Lord Edward was nearly twenty years older than his wife) as to preclude a genuine friendship.

"And now, Papa, what have you to tell me?" Pallas was dignified and beautiful as she took her seat in the chair her father had vacated.

"We will leave you to be alone; come, my dear," Lord Edward was saying to his reluctant spouse, who pouted at the over-tactfulness of her husband.

"Is it necessary? Do Edward and Orry have to leave us, Papa?"

"Not at all, unless you wish it, since Edward has already heard what I have come to say," replied Ralph. He stretched out his fine, well-made hands to the blaze in the Adam grate. Orabella settled delightedly into her corner of the sofa, to which, with a pat, she invited her lover.

"I came, my dear," began Ralph slowly, "because there is news of Matthew."

It was Orabella who gave a cry; Pallas, the colour draining from her lips, sat quite still.

"Yes, Papa?"

"I took it for granted you would wish to hear it, and perhaps return with me to Bristol, where you may hear the whole account direct from the lips of the person who brought it."

"That was very kind of you, Papa," said Pallas gently. She reached out and took Orabella's trembling hand in her own. "Pray tell us all you know."

III

"But," she cried, "if Matthew was alive when last this person Bowling saw him, is it not possible he is still living, and a prisoner in the hands of the Moors?"

The men exchanged glances.

"It is possible," said Ralph Burmester at last.

"Why do you speak in that tone?" she exhorted him. The calmness had gone, there was wildness in her eyes, in the starting whiteness of the knuckles that gripped the arms of her chair.

"Pallas——" he began. She interrupted him.

"For God's sake, Papa, will you not speak plainly? I'm not a child; I can bear to hear whatever you know—so long as you keep nothing from me."

"My child," said Ralph heavily, "there are things that are worse than death. It would be better Matthew were dead than in the hands of the Moors."

"You mean, they will torture him?" She seemed bent on extracting from him the most agonizing detail.

Edward Sax broke in; his quiet, steady voice brought relief into an atmosphere of almost unbearable tension.

"She has a right to know," he said quietly to his father-in-law. "It has been the custom of the Moors, during the whole of this century, and possibly before, to take all shipwrecked persons and foreigners found on their coasts into slavery," he told her. "The lot of a slave, among so barbarian a people, is not, as you can imagine, a happy one."

"Oh, but surely Matthew is dead!" cried Orabella, the tears rolling down her blanched cheeks. Her husband looked at her anxiously; it was surely bad for her to be present during this scene of painful emotion.

"We have every reason to suppose so." Ralph looked at his elder daughter, beseeching her with his eyes to accept the consoling probability.

"Suppose? Who are we to suppose? How dare we suppose?" Her voice rang with scorn. "Surely, surely something is being done——?"

"It goes without saying. Edward himself is going to approach the Secretary of State——"

"Who? Mr. Pitt?"

"Pitt will certainly do all he can for us, and through him I hope to make contact with the Governor of Gibraltar and our ambassador to Morocco," said Lord Edward, with the simplicity of one who has right of access to such august sources. Orabella's tearful eyes flashed momentarily with pride. "If Flood is living, he is certain to be found; especially as, in the circumstances, there will be no difficulty about the ransom."

"No, indeed; that would come out of the estate."

"I suppose this Bowling person is to be trusted," surprisingly remarked Orabella.

"It is difficult to see what he would gain by lying. But Shergill, who took down his deposition, can find no reason to doubt him. The only part of the narrative that seems to me well-nigh incredible is the account of his own escape. A more singular combination of good luck and coincidence has never come to my hearing."

"One thing is not in his favour," came grimly from Pallas. "That he deserted his companion."

"Let us be just, my dear. It was hardly his fault that on going back to look for a man he already believed to be dead, he should lose his way; any more than it was his virtue that he had the amazing good fortune to encounter a friend on his blundering through the Moroccan wilderness."

"I will come back with you to Bristol, Papa."

"I thought you would wish to do so."

"Not that I can do anything," she added, with a bitterness foreign to her nature, "but I would like to hear the man's account from his own lips. I have the idea"—the ghost of a smile flickered across her drawn face—"that you, dear Papa, are sparing me much."

"Oh, Pally, what's the use of tormenting yourself?" cried Orabella. "Why go back to Bristol, where, as you say, you can do nothing, when there is so much here you haven't yet seen?—and Lady Manton's ball on the 14th, and the grand reception at Devonshire House, to which we are all invited?"

"I am very grateful for all your and Edward's kindness." She had risen, and sorrow hung upon her like a veil. "But I think I am better at Bristol, where I belong; and besides, I have little Fanny's education now to look after!"

She suffered her father's and sister's kisses, and Edward's salute upon her outstretched hand, and went slowly down the endless drawing-room. The door closed behind her, and even Orabella, who was not perceptive about such matters, heard in its closing the finale of Pallas's youth.

Lady Edward rose, stubbed a leg with the tip of her satin slipper, and blew her nose. Ralph had gone to his room.

"Damn Matthew Flood! If he's suffering more than he's made Pally suffer, 'tis no more than he deserves!"

"My darling wife." Lord Edward interrupted the outburst, taking the handkerchief from his lady's hand, and tenderly completing the process she had begun. "Far be it from me to disparage any word or action of yours!"

"What is it now?" demanded Orabella. "I suppose I look a fright, but I never did cry becomingly, and it looks worse than ever in this silly magenta gown!"

" 'I have a mistress, for perfections rare
In every eye, but in my thoughts most fair,' "

quoted Lord Edward, one of whose charms it was, in his lady's eye, to be apt with the anthology of love. "Yet, if I could pick one mote in that heavenly beam, it would be—why, my darling, do you call your sister Pally?"

"Pally?—Pally?" repeated Orabella, baffled by the question. "Why not Pally? We've called her that all her life."

"And yet how ill the foolish little name becomes that lovely creature, whose lustre surely derives from the goddess for whom she is christened."

"Well, you may consider Pally as wise as Pallas Athene, I think she is just a goose. First it's slaves and now it's this pauper child. I never met such a girl for neglecting her opportunities," said Orabella—whose bark, however, was so much worse than her bite that she emerged from the tidying process to smile very sweetly upon her husband. "I will call her Pallas all the same, Edward, if you feel it is more becoming to my position," she offered obligingly.

Lord Edward laughed at this ingenious form of capitulation.

"I think most people would feel that Pallas is more suitable, now that your sister is no longer a child."

"Well, I'm going to bed," announced Orabella, "and I hope I shall not dream about this horrid affair—which I suppose you and Papa will talk about until the dawn."


In the powder closet opening from her bedroom, where, by Pallas's request, they had placed the child's cot, Pallas was bending over a red-cheeked, sleepy little girl.

"Have you everything you want, Fanny?"

"Yes, please, miss," mumbled Fanny, who had already had lessons from Betty in polite address. Her little face looked up with the deep bewilderment of a child over whom sweep the great waves of adult authority; she could make nothing, as yet, of this clean, soft universe to which she had been transported from her Watford squalor.

"Very well, then. God bless you. Lie down, and go to sleep."

Fanny must learn her prayers. Fanny must learn to keep herself clean and tidy, and remindful of her duty to her superiors. This, perhaps, thought Pallas, as she softly closed the door, was to be her compensation for all the children—Matthew's children—that she had never borne.



Book III

CUBA

CHAPTER I

I

THE lovely, blue, indolent morning was filled, as with a flight of doves, with the white-gowned figures of the novices and pupils of Santa Clara released for the recreation hour. All save the youngest, the mere children not yet in their teens, who rushed to chase the hummingbird moths, or teased the sisters for ants' eggs to feed the goldfish, sank on the stone benches in the shade of the cloisters, throwing back the white muslin *velos* that covered in most instances heads of the sleekest blue-black hair.

They were very young; the average age that year was between thirteen and fourteen. There were a few overgrown, unhappy-looking young women of sixteen, undecided whether to become nuns or merely to return to their families as "Beata." They had neither the temperament nor the desire to be "Beata," which was tantamount to public confession of failure, both as woman and as a religious. Every well-to-do Cuban family had its "Beata"—its little group of spinster dependents, vowed to chastity and good works, allotted as a matter of course the humblest and least enviable offices on occasions of family state, and from whom it was taken for granted that any of their relations could exact the most tiresome and even menial services, should need arise.

The daughter of an ancient chapetone nobility tossed her shining head; at the age of twelve and a half María Anunciata de las Fuentes was on the point of leaving Santa Clara to be married.

"Just look at Concepción Periera! She's a mass of pimples all over. She says she's only fourteen, but it's quite a lie—I know for a fact she's sixteen in September. She might just as well face it and be a Beata."

"I'd sooner be a nun," lisped a small, plump girl, whose lips were moist with the juice of the yellow mastic plum she pulled out of her pocket. "One at least has some fun first——!"

"Only for a week!" was the scornful rejoinder. The speaker paused to draw breath, and, plucking the heavy white cotton stuff of the convent uniform away from her body, to fan a little air into the soft, moist hollow between her immature breasts. "I'm going to have fun all the rest of my life! And when I'm at the theatre, or watching the bullfight, or dancing with my admirers, I shall think of you all, boxed up here——!"

"Oh, María Anunciata, we shan't be here so long as all that! And you're not the only one to be betrothed!" came the protesting chorus. The red-haired Guadalupe Cascados de Mattos shook her sensational head indignantly.

"I wouldn't let myself be betrothed, either, to a man I'd never seen. Suppose he's ugly?"

"I shan't look at him!"

"That's all very fine; but supposing he's old as well?" persisted Guadalupe, intent on destroying her friend's self-satisfaction.

"I shan't make a fuss about that either. An elderly husband means more

time to oneself—I've heard my sisters say so. And he's got a hundred household slaves and he gives the most elegant entertainments. He arranged a *corrida de patos* for the last feast of La Caridad, and there were fifty *guajiros*, and nobody killed the goose until my intended galloped across and did it—blip!—with one swing of the sword——”

“Who cares about goose-killing!” A scornful voice challenged this boastfulness. “I shall marry a man who kills bulls—and perhaps I'll ride into the ring myself, like the Condesa de Coria——”

“Ss-ss-ss!” The warning sibilant rang along the benches. Two of the novices came past, with, between them, a tall, pale girl whose eyes evaded nervously the glances of her erstwhile companions. The elder pupils nudged each other. Up to a year ago, Graciela, although much older than they, had been a friend; then, quite abruptly, she ceased to be a playmate and confidant, and became one of that strange, reserved and remote community that partook without sharing in the life of the pupils: whose main offices were those of exhortation and espionage, who were sometimes to be liked but never trusted, and were regarded with secret, scornful pity by girls about to leave the convent. Graciela was nearly eighteen; she had started her novitiate at fourteen, and was about to forsake a bright and beautiful world for the life of the cloister.

“I wonder whether she'll change her mind?” An eager whisper launched the conjecture as the three figures went by. “She's only got another fortnight, and then—ugh! Fancy having your hair shaved off!”

“Fancy the coffin!”

“And having the prayers for the dead said over you!” The chorus swelled, caught the attention of the nuns who, in their sober blue habits, moved from group to group, watching, listening, breaking up *têtes-à-têtes* and controlling any tendency to over-high spirits that might break out into unseemly romping or quarrels. Their mild, foolish faces held a perpetual anxiety that roused the mockery of their charges, who, for the most part, in worldly experience and cunning, were far more than a match for their guardians.

Of the Santa Clara pupils of this particular year, two out of the roster of a hundred and twelve had chosen voluntarily to become Brides of Christ; five had been gently, but remorselessly coerced into it, and one, Graciela de Coria, who was preparing to go home for the customary week of festivities that preceded the taking of the final vows, was to be received within a few weeks: an occasion of great excitement and emotional upheaval for the convent. There was generally quite an outburst of religious ardour after the ceremony—gradually fading out as the effect of its tremendous pomps waned in the memories of the youthful spectators.

“When Carmela was received I thought for quite a month that I'd be a nun as well,” somebody was confessing. “But it's not so very much fun, when you're going to be a nun! You've got to go about with the religious girls, and you're not supposed to listen to any of the gossip, and of course you mustn't get any messages or love-letters. But she looked divine in her white brocade and the crown of lilies—and, do you know, she got no less than four proposals in her last week—one from somebody who fell madly in love with her at the theatre—I'd have changed my mind, wouldn't you?”

From the eldest to the youngest Santa Clara pupil (the majority arrived soon

after their eighth birthdays, but there were startling instances of parents who found it wiser to lose no time in incarcerating a six-year-old daughter), there was not one who was not keenly aware that she was there, not so much for the good of her education—which amounted to little more than religious instruction, the use of the pen, a smattering of painting and needlework, and music for those who were musically inclined—as to preserve her virginity from the hot-headed advances of the island gallants. The result was an atmosphere as excitable as might be expected in a cageful of young, oestral tigresses, about whose confines prowls the ever-desirous male. Periodically there were small, hysterical outbursts, quelled by a judicious dilution of religion with vegetable purge; but for the most part imagination found its sufficient outlet in conversation, and in a few mildly amorous passages between the older pupils and the younger and more attractive of the nuns.

"Juanita, you haven't finished your banner, have you? Come and show me how much more you have to do before we stretch it on the frame."

The girl addressed pouted and twitched her shoulder away from the soft, admonitory hand.

"My hands are too hot for sewing—and besides, there's no more gold thread until the pedlar comes."

"I think I can find some. Come."

Pulling a face at her companions, the unwilling Juanita was led gently but implacably away.

"I thought as much. Juanita's not to be friends with us any longer."

"They might just as well make a nun of her." The señorita de las Fuentes, lovely as a little doll, with her premature airs of languishing coquetry, her small, sparkling teeth and gestures of exquisite and finished grace, put up a hand to press the forbidden curl which she had started to cultivate on either temple. "With her bad teeth and that hooked nose of hers she will never find an admirer, and her husband will surely run a mile when they lift the wedding veil!"

"First it was me, then it was María Cayetuña, now it's Juanita!" The small, fat girl reflectively licked her thumb and forefinger, after throwing the plum stone away—with a hasty glance to see that the act was not observed. "They're always trying to chase me in among the religious girls, but nobody's making a nun out of *me*! And though that Juanita's as weak as water, and seems to think she's got to be an angel, since Sister Magdalena took to giving her sachets to wear in her corset, and Sister Sofía brushed her hair for a whole half-hour yesterday afternoon, I'll bet you the next packet of sweets they send me from home that they won't have any luck with María Cayetuña either!"

"Then they'd better try the plantations!" came viciously from the lips of the señorita de las Fuentes. Her great eyes, lavishly fringed with black, flashed resentment at this insolent mention of her rival's name. Not that she herself admitted the rivalry. The two little girls barely acknowledged each other's existence—María Anunciata snatching aside her spreading skirts and averting her head when she met María Cayetuña on the galleries; while the other's resentment took, it is to be feared, a less aristocratic form. A certain part of María Anunciata's anatomy was still tender from recent outrage; it was barely twenty-four hours since a lithe instep, at a crucial moment

whisking aside a chair, had caused her to sit with a bump upon the marble paving of the chapel—an insult never to be forgiven or forgotten by María Anunciata de las Fuentes. Not only her enemies but several of her friends had laughed, though none save the irreverent Catalina would have had the impudence to revive the episode in the victim's presence.

"If your tail's still hurting you, why don't you ask for some of the salve they gave me when I fell down the garden steps?" she had the effrontery to inquire.

It is regrettable to record of a de las Fuentes that María Anunciata rejected the suggestion with a mouthful of saliva, which she spat with surprising accuracy at the speaker's feet, before rising and, with an imperious gesture to her friend Guadalupe, moving away.

"Anyhow," serenely remarked Catalina, when the giggling had subsided, "I think María Cayetuña's more fun than María Anunciata, even if she is so-and-so!"

The bright glance of a small, Jewish-looking girl sharpened.

"But if you're so-and-so!"—she glanced hurriedly over her shoulder before using the synonym for the forbidden word—"you can't be a nun, can you?"

"You can't if you're just ordinary, but— Ss!" Again a blue-robed figure was hovering near. The chatter became very loud and innocent. As the nun moved farther away it droned back to the deathless subject.

"Who do you think gave me the *piropo* yesterday? Who but Santiago de Lorcha! If that's not something to talk about——!"

"If you're interested in men of that age——!"

"Whatever age he may be, Santiago's the handsomest man in Havana, and he's got dozens of mistresses. You needn't pretend you wouldn't like to be one of them!"

But it was too hot, by now, even to bicker. Damp little palms sought relief from cool stone and feet swung drowsily within the pale bells of petticoats. Within the patio, that held, as in a furnace, the midday ferocity of the sun, every growing thing swooned, each limp leaf and stalk was a couch for some heat-dazed insect. The shadow of the cloister turned the white gowns to a frail lilac, and drew along the darkling wall a fresco of young heads that drooped like blossoms under the burden of summer.

II

She leaned against the tree-trunk, surrendered to sensuousness: to the heat, close-pressed like scented velvet beneath the dark weight of foliage: to the somnolent buzz of insects: to a spangling of sunlight that spattered with hot gold an uncovered instep, the faint globe of a shrouded breast. Her raised hands clasped the tree-trunk above and behind her head, which rested against the rough bark and partly against her lifted arm, on which her warm cheek lay, shadowed by the dark fringes of her eyelids, in an attitude of sleep.

"You're a hundred times prettier than that vain María Anunciata, and I know lots of other people who think so too."

"Who?" The monosyllable came in the voice of a somnambulist through sleepily curving lips.

"Well, Pedro Ferroblando, for one; he is quite mad about you. Catalina told me so."

"Mad enough to marry me?"

"Oh, yes, and so are a dozen more!" came the loyal assertion.

"A dozen? What should I do with a dozen?" The arms of the somnambulist dropped, her eyes opened a little wildly, she gazed round her, as though disconcerted to find herself in her present surroundings.

"Why are you frowning?" her companion was saying anxiously. Little Lucía de Coria, who had been lying at her feet, with chin pillowed in a hollowed palm, scrambled to her knees. "Don't go, please don't go yet, *María mía!* It's so lovely, being alone for a little while. . . . Have I vexed you?"

María Cayetuña stretched herself with a curious, slow gentleness. When she answered, her voice had drawing and liquid inflections, at odds with the soft, slurred castellano of her companion.

"How should you vex me? You are such a very little girl, Lucía!" The child shrank, as from a reproach. "And I have many things to worry me," added María Cayetuña in a whisper.

"What kind of things? I'd never betray *your* secrets. Oh, do make me your confidante, María Cayetuña! You don't know how much I love you, and how faithful I will be. I'm only two years younger than you, after all——"

The elder girl bent, mechanically, to receive the proffered kiss; she was, even in the bulky convent uniform, incredibly slim. The thick white folds, gathered into the stiff neckband, emphasized the length and fragility of her neck, no less than its golden darkness. Most of the girls were sallow, or greeny-pale, like the pallor of nenuphar; María Cayetuña's small, high-cheek-boned face wore like golden-bronze lacquer its warm overtone that darkened beneath the brows and displayed through the translucency of the temples a delicate network of veins. Her enormous eyes of liquid darkness seemed to float upon the pure, blue-white porcelain of the globes, and their wide alertness contrasted with the sensuous, heavy-lidded glance of the other girls. The profile was delicate and a little birdlike—wide, sensitive nostrils narrowing sharply to the tip of a little pointed beak. Her full lips opened, when she smiled, squarely over beautiful teeth, and wore the purply bloom of a dark crimson rose.

"It's very cruel of you not to love me," Lucía pouted, "when I would do anything in the world to please you. And when Graciela's gone you won't have any one to talk to——"

"Perhaps she'll change her mind. People do sometimes—even at the last minute," asserted María Cayetuña, challenging the fates she knew to be implacable. Her hand fell with a gesture of whose tenderness she was hardly aware, on the shoulder of the younger girl.

"Oh, no, *she* won't." Lucía shook her head decisively. "She's very religious—and we've got four sisters who are nuns already; it runs in the family," she added seriously. "I might even be a nun myself—but I hope I shan't, because I want to be married and have some babies. And my sister-in-law Isabela, who married my eldest brother Diego, has promised to find a husband for me. I think Francisco Cascados is a little bit in love with me, but Guadalupe is such a grown-up, jealous thing, she will never say. I won't be a Beata, anyway!"

María Cayetuña moved restlessly, reflecting that she was spared that prospect, at least; how could one be a Beata without a family to keep one? She changed the subject abruptly.

"Did you get leave to go home for Graciela's 'week'?"

Lucía's face lightened and she clapped her hands.

"Oh, yes! Won't that be delightful? We shall enjoy ourselves every moment of the day. We shall—*madre mía!*" she broke off to cry. "Why shouldn't—? Why don't—? Dearest, adorable María Cayetuña!" She flung her arms about the elder girl's waist. "Of course you must! Why didn't I think of it before?"

"Why didn't you—what?" María Cayetuña smiled gravely on these transports, in which she had no share.

"Of course you must come too! You must indeed! I shall ask Isabela, and she will never dream of refusing. You don't know what a pleasant, lively person she is! She never wanted Graciela to be a nun, she's not like my brother, she doesn't believe in people shutting themselves up and missing all the fun there is in life."

María Cayetuña's lips stiffened across her set teeth, through which she drew a quick, hissing breath.

"You mean—you would ask me to stay with you—in your home?"

"Why not? I've had Rosario and Consuelo—both—in the holidays—and Vittoria twice, on Sundays," declared Lucía confidently. She rattled on eagerly, radiant with her inspiration. "You know: they send the big coach for us after chapel, and we are allowed to choose whatever we want for lunch—the cook makes special dishes: and afterwards we dress up and act plays or the servants play for us and we dance. Truly, we have the loveliest times since Diego got married—" Again she broke off, surprised, almost aghast at the look María Cayetuña turned on her: a look of savage urgency, of compulsion almost, to which the steely clasp of fingers round her wrist added emphasis.

"You mean I could come and do those things—at your house?"

"Of—of course, if you'd like to," stammered the little girl. "Would you like to? I'd—I'd like it so much, more than anything in the world."

In the pregnant silence that followed, a ball, with which some of the younger children were playing in the shadow of the palms, came trickling to the speaker's feet. Instead of replying, María Cayetuña stooped quickly and tossed it back to its owner, who, instead of going on with the game, came, followed by her playmates, to make a circle round Lucía and her companion.

"Sing for us, María Caya! Sing for us!"

Angered by the distraction of her idol's attention, Lucía caught María Cayetuña's sleeve.

"Say you'll come—say you'll come!"

Curious as little jackdaws, the children crowded in.

"Come where? Come where? Sing, sing!"

"Go away!" Tears spurted to Lucía's eyes as she thrust away the ones who were pressing upon her and María Cayetuña, at whom she looked up anxiously, imploringly, desperate for the assent that should seal her intentions. "I am asking María Caya a secret—"

"What's the secret? What's the secret?" chanted the jackdaws, mischief-loving, and enjoying her distress.

Clenching her fists, Lucía shouted at the teasing horde:

"She's coming home with me and Graciela, for our 'week'!"

A small, pert child, a newcomer to Santa Clara, elbowed her way to the front of the group.

"You don't ever go visits, do you, María Cayetuña, not even in the holidays?" A malicious knowledge twinkled in her eyes, and several of the other children, among whom María Cayetuña was a favourite, turned on her.

"*Tonta!* That's because her home is Santa Clara. You were born here, weren't you, María Cayetuña?" It was considered by many of the little ones very romantic to have been born in Santa Clara.

"Well, why didn't her mother take her away afterwards?" persisted the unpleasant child.

"Because my mother was dead." Because it was her instinct to make conquests, María Cayetuña bestowed her most melting smile upon the speaker. "And so, you see, the nuns went on looking after me."

"And your father was a great English lord, wasn't he?" prompted the staunch Lucía, frowning to snub the newcomer.

"A *grande* of some sort; I fancy he was a duke," was the serious rejoinder. "I do not understand the English titles. The English are a very noble race; they have a great many titles. *All* the English are noble, and their aristocracy is the richest and most powerful in the world," romanced the great-grandchild of Hercules Flood.

"They can't be so rich and powerful as all that," retorted her tormentor, "because they couldn't keep Havana, and they were very bad and cruel when they were here—and my grandfather was killed in the siege! And they persecuted the Catholics—"

With a squeal of rage at this insult to her beloved, Lucía sprang at the speaker and slapped her face, then chased her into the bushes, where one of the vigilant nuns went running to find out the cause of the disturbance.

"Don't pay attention to that stupid little Carlota!" pleaded one of the others. "Tell us some more about your father and the English *grandes!*"

She laughed, placed her hands on her hips and swaggered a little, flashing her eyes over her audience. She knew she could hold them with her stories that they liked better than the innocent, moral narratives of the nuns, that rose always to the same climax—the triumph of virtue and the punishment of vice—and ended always on the same note of pious exhortation. There were no morals to María Cayetuña's stories—which, strictly speaking, were not stories at all, but odds and ends snatched from the fullness of an erratic memory, and furnished with the exuberance of her own personality. This was her favourite of them all:

"My father was ruler of a great English province, and some day I'll go to England and they'll make a—*a* queen of me and I'll tell them all what they've got to do and—and I'll burn the ones who disobey me——" Her eyes glittered with this preposterous effort of imagination.

"*Sancta María!* But how far away is England? Is it as far as Spain? As far as America?"

"Farther than both," smiled María Cayetuña, who had not the remotest idea where England might be. "I shall sail there in a great ship, like my father did, and perhaps the ship will go down and everybody will be drowned but

me. And that will be a miracle and everybody will say prayers to me, like they do to Nuestra Señora de la Caridad that Rodrigo and Juan de Joicos found floating in the bay of Nipe——”

When the sensation and agitated protestations following this announcement had died down, another child asked innocently:

“And your mother; was she a *grande* too?”

María Cayetuña paused and moistened her lips.

“In her own country she was some sort of an *infanta*.”

A shrill giggle came from behind her; she spun on her heel. María Anunciata and Guadalupe stood there, their arms round each other's waists, exchanging those scornful and mocking grimaces in which small girls excel. It was María Anunciata who repeated the high-pitched giggle, although her pretty face was vixenish with rage, while her friend pretended to be overcome by mirth.

“Whatever does one expect to hear next? ‘An *infanta* in her own country’! And, pray, what country was that?”

María Cayetuña's body, soft, quick and fluid in its movements, like her voice, became very still; her lips, which had gone white like bone, were pressed closely together. The little girls stood hypnotized, half-terrified by the change of atmosphere, by the scene between their elders.

“An *infanta*! What a liar she is!” María Anunciata recovered herself to sneer. “A *black infanta*!” She turned to the gaping circle to shout contemptuously: “You should all be ashamed of yourselves for listening to such lies! Her mother was a slave!” Transported with her rage and hatred, she paid no attention to Guadalupe's sudden, warning clutch on her arm. “I'm leaving and I don't care!” she screamed. “It's time somebody said what they thought about having to share a dormitory and a bench with the daughter of a nigger! And always giving herself airs and acting as if she was as good as every one else, when her mother was just a common, black slave——!”

“It's a lie!” breathed María Cayetuña. For a moment even her enemies fell back from her flaming eyes, the passionate pallor of her lips. “A wicked, infamous lie!”

“Go on—prove it!” jeered Guadalupe, shamed into supporting her friend, although she was frightened; she was not leaving, and María Anunciata had defied more than common discipline in her open attack. “Go on!” she screamed. “Show us your hair—show us——!”

“My father was an English *grande*! Do *grandes* marry slaves? Slaves can't get married to white people—the Church doesn't allow it. I'd be a bastard! They don't have bastards in the convent——” There was a deep reproof, a fluttering defensiveness in the words: unconsciously she put her hand to her throat, where a pulse was beating as a bird's wings beat against the bars of a cage.

“Yes, they do!” María Anunciata sneered her triumph round the circle. “Carmen de Campo Mayor was a bastard. Her mother was the Condesa de Campo Mayor and her father was Don Frederico Braganza. They were both people of the highest families and members of the Catholic aristocracy. And you're the bastard of an English heretic and a common slave!”

Before the spectators had time to guess her intention, Catalina Ferroblanco tore the pin out of her *velo* and dragged it from cheek-bone to chin across the

speaker's face. While the circle stood paralysed, and Guadalupe shrieked to high heaven at the injury done to her friend, the voice of the nun whom, on the whole, she most detested spoke in María Cayetuña's ear.

"María Cayetuña Fludd, you are to go straight to the Abbess's parlour."

A silence fell, in which the hysterical sobbing of María Anunciata was the only sound. María Cayetuña moved silently, and with a strange, heart-rending dignity, out of the shadow of the palms. She had the air of a little *infanta* detaching herself from an indelicate situation in which, by some means beyond her control, she had become involved. Not the smallest and newest pupil there but felt a hollowing of the stomach and weakening of the knees. For nobody, nowadays, was sent to the Abbess's parlour.

But the bold daughter of the house of Ferroblanco sprang forward in front of them all, to fling her arms about her heroine's neck.

"Do not care for any of them, María mia! Thou art the beloved of my brother Pedro, and I love thee more than any of these stupid people. *Andavéte, reina mia!* All but pigs must see that thou art of royal blood!"

And after this enormity of speech and conduct she tossed her head, and accompanied with marked defiance the scandalized nun who led her away. On the face of María Cayetuña, as she went slowly to her judgment, was a white look of bewilderment: a sacrificial look.

CHAPTER II

I

"TAKE off your veil."

María Cayetuña did so. She would rather have been asked to strip herself bare, and the old woman who commanded her knew it.

"Sit there. No, turned in the opposite direction. Facing the glass—so. Now look at yourself. Do not speak until I give you leave."

Such a small, white figure reflected in the glass, with trembling palms pressed together between its knees; such a tragic small face, with eyes like dark, overflowing springs. As always, when she was miserable, the golden bloom had vanished from her skin, which was now a dusty grey, a thin cobweb, drawn tightly across the delicate jaw and cheekbone. Her lips were puffed, were purplish; she looked . . . she knew what she looked, with that damnable hair, one plait of which had come loose from its strand of wool, sprouting behind her ear. In the rearing of her spine was her acceptance of her looks, her proud resolution to conceal her inward agony from her companion.

Behind her, the Abbess gave no sign. She had aged much in the last thirteen years; at about the time of the great hurricane of 1768 she had had a stroke, from which she had not fully recovered. The heavy, masculine face was slightly distorted, the jaw dragged a little to one side, and the left eye drawn down at its outer corner with almost the effect of a wink; yet the somewhat Rabelaisian flavour this added to her expression in no way detracted from her dignity. The strong, decisive and governing mind conquered the gargoyle exterior and forced others to ignore it, as she did herself.

But movement had become very difficult; she seldom now left her own apartments, to which her lieutenants brought word of every smallest detail that passed within the convent. There were little newcomers among the pupils who had never even seen the Abbess, and who would have been scared out of their small wits if they had been told that not merely their names, but the most trivial incidents of their behaviour and the minutest details of their appearance were known to the old woman, whose moral dominion waxed as her physical presence waned in the convent memory.

Nor was she less well-informed upon external events. Many visitors were received in the Abbess's parlour; much political, ecclesiastical and religious business was discussed across her board. She was engaged, with the help of one of the lay sisters, in a vast documentation for a history of the Catholic Church in Cuba; her notes and her quills were to hand when they brought María Cayetuña to her parlour, and left her to deal with the biggest problem that had ever presented itself since the foundation of Santa Clara.

There was a strange mixture of understanding and pity in the old eyes, as they looked upon María Cayetuña. The old voice, when she spoke, was as deep and heavy, but a little slower than formerly: because since her stroke she had always to struggle with a slight impediment in her speech; she detested it when people were obliged to ask her to repeat her words.

"You do not like being told to look at yourself, do you? You need not lie, my poor child; I have no desire to wound you." A chain clinked, the heavy blue cloth of the habit made a slight rustling, as the Abbess, with a smothered groan, shifted herself in her chair; her flesh had become a very great burden to her. "Your growing pride, the disorderly influence you have on your companions have been reported to me many times. To be a source of conflict, no less than to enter into conflict yourself, is a denial of Christian rule; I am told that you are guilty of many such denials. What have you to say for yourself?"

"I—I have never sought to cause conflict, Reverend Mother"—her lips were trembling, but she controlled them with more than a child's strength of will—"but when María Anunciata de las Fuentes called me a bastard——"

"Why did María Anunciata de las Fuentes call you a bastard?"

"Because"—the answer came almost with gentleness—"she is my enemy."

"What cause have you given her for becoming your enemy?"

"One is naturally the enemy of a person one dislikes."

The Abbess made a movement of impatience.

"Have you not been forbidden to discuss your parentage?"

"Yes, Reverend Mother; but the other girls discuss theirs." Injustice roused in her, as always, a quiet resistance that annoyed and baffled her guardians. The cringing anxiety to please, to oblige, which, in their experience, went always with mixed blood, had no part in María Cayetuña's character; not for nothing was she the child of the British governing classes and an untamed savage of African forest.

"You are forbidden to accuse others, in excuse of your own fault."

María Cayetuña inclined her head. Her hands made an instinctive movement to lift the veil which lay across her shoulders, and replace it upon her hair.

"Leave that alone."

There was a long silence, during which the child's spine stiffened. The Abbess, looking across her shoulder into the glass, was reminded in some fashion that was not physical of the angry, handsome man who had sat almost in the same place thirteen years ago. There was nothing plastic about that one! And in this, to whom plasticity would have been becoming, from whom it was expected, it was equally absent. There was all that subtle seeming-to-yield, that tendril-clinging that belongs, as to the forest vine, to the weaker sex; and, beneath, there was a resistance which, unless it were conquered, might prove the ruin of them all.

She reflected upon the magnitude of the interests that involved this small figure, poised butterfly-light in the spread of its snow-white petticoats; upon the frightful risk she herself had taken; and upon the tremendous machinery that had been put in action on account of this unconscious child, whose ignorance of her true importance in their planning was only equalled by the fictitious value she placed upon herself in her vain romancings.

By some means or other, María Cayetuña's pride had got to be broken; how otherwise could she be brought of her own free will—that part was essential—to forge the last link in the chain devised by her guardians to secure their own interests?

"María Cayetuña Flood. You are now thirteen years of age. Nine years of your life you have spent in Santa Clara."

"Yes, Reverend Mother." Once more she bent her head in acceptance of the incontrovertible fact.

"What do you remember of the time before that?"

María Cayetuña caught her breath; a flood of crimson poured from her throat up to the roots of her hair, her eyes darted sideways, like those of a hunted animal. She made some involuntary movement, to rise, to flee. . . .

"Sit still; and answer me," said the Abbess implacably.

II

She had always refused to let herself think of it, and by staunch suppression of distasteful memory, had arrived, to all intents and purposes, at forgetfulness. Certain things reminded, stung, provoked and wounded her: but for the most part the associations they evoked were indistinct and vague, and became more so every day.

A tumbledown cabin, with a door and no windows, its walls supported by, rather than supporting, the piles of immemorial garbage that negro indolence could never be persuaded to remove farther than was necessary for bare convenience; a floor crusted with the dung of the livestock that wandered in and out—fowls and lean pigs with stringy rust-coloured hair, an occasional bullock. A horde of dirty piccanins, jet-black and mother-naked, with sore eyes and distended stomachs, who rolled about in the dust and dung, or plunged their fists into the stinking pan of salt meat and beans, or varied this procedure by tugging on their mother's skirts—a wrinkled slut, who, squatting on her heels in their midst, would remain placid as a cow, while on either side a child clung to her pendulous udders. It made María Cayetuña retch to remember that she had done her share of scuffling with the rest: had pushed her little nose into the flabby, strongly smelling flesh, and quenched her thirst from the black, rubbery nipples.

Most of the convent girls declared they had had negro mammies, but she was intelligent enough to recognize the difference between the slatterns of the cabins and the fat, sleek negresses, with their heads bound up in snow-white cloths, who aired their charges in carriages about the town.

She must have been very young when she began to realize the ignominious position of the negroid and mulatto population, the degradation of their existence, the contempt in which they were held by the white races. Although she herself was too small to suffer from it, it made her uncomfortable to see her companions beaten for trivial offences, knocked into the gutter merely to give place to some white-skinned person.

The woman with whom she had been placed, a niece of Faquita the laundress, enjoyed some measure of convent favour for the skill she displayed in goffering linen, and for her submissive (if superficial) acceptance of such odds and ends of moral teaching as the nuns managed to instil into her hard, woolly skull. She eagerly took on the charge laid upon her by the Abbess, which meant an infinitesimal addition to her earnings, and when, shortly after her fourth birthday, they sent to reclaim María Cayetuña,

howled over her departure as though she had been one of her own numerous litter.

María Cayetuña did not howl. And she took like a duck to water to a new régime that included personal cleanliness, regular hours of feeding, games with little children who neither rolled naked in the gutter, sought in each other's hair for lice, smelt sourly of stale grease nor performed intimate and inæsthetic functions in public places. The Catholic observances she lapped up like milk; it was less than forty-eight hours before she was genuflecting and crossing herself in solemn imitation of her new companions. The chapel, with its rich gilding and paintings, its cnades and heavy scent of incense, filled her with sensuous bliss.

She had, at this age, all the tendency of her mother's race to exhibitionism, and could hardly contain her joy when, in the singing class, it was discovered that her voice was the richest and truest of any among the pupils of her own age. The nun who took the class laid her hand on María Cayetuña's head, and told her that she must not be vain, because she had a great gift to dedicate to the service of God.

María Cayetuña had no notion what dedication meant, and had only just begun hazily to associate the crucifix with the genuflections of her little friends; but in little more than a month an infallible instinct had warned her to suppress all references to her previous existence in the slave cabin. She had learned a shame and a shrinking from which she sought escape in the joyous new life with which she was surrounded.

She was a good little child, on the whole; gay, sweet-tempered, passionately affectionate, obedient to those of whom she was fond. She soon became the pet and favourite of the nuns, and it was long before she was spoilt by it. She liked to be praised for being good, for sewing a neat seam, for repeating correctly the verse of a hymn. Her moods of rollicking, childish gaiety alternated with others—quiet, dim, dreamy, in which she lay with her head pillowed on the crisp, linen-plated bosom of one of the Sisters, begging to be told a story; sometimes inventing vague little fantasies of her own. As she grew older, this tendency increased; the nuns laughed, christened her "*La Quimérica*," warning her not to allow this dreaminess to invade her hours of devotion—which, nevertheless, it is to be feared she did. It was a matter beyond her controlling.

It never occurred to her for a moment that there was any difference between her and the other pupils, several of whom had skins fully as dark as her own—though none had her funny, frizzy hair, which she herself used to make jokes about, and tease into ridiculous horns to make the other children laugh—up to the day when a newcomer, a tall, insolent child about a year older than herself, broke into the chorus of laughter to sneer, "It's nigger's hair! María Cayetuña Fludd is a nigger!"

There was a terrible scene. It was followed by María Cayetuña's first summons to the Abbess's parlour, where she was informed, gravely and kindly, that, although her father was an English *caballero*, her mother had been a negress; that she need never speak about it, or even think about it, until she was old enough to have all explained to her; and that for the present she must take no notice when people said foolish things about a matter on which they were even less informed than she. She was young enough for this

to console her; especially as every one was particularly kind to her afterwards. She was given a handful of sweetmeats, a special cake was baked for her, she was made conscious of a tender and loving vigilance. She loved love; she nestled into it like a bird into its nest.

The culprit was evidently punished, for she never repeated her insult, and as time went on it seemed to be forgotten. The subject was never revived until María Cayetuña was eight years old, and it was time to think about her confirmation. This time she was told a little more of the truth.

Her father, the English *caballero*, Don Mateo Flood, had actually been joined in wedlock with a negress. This was only possible because he was a heretic—marriage between Catholics and negroes being strictly forbidden. They had been married by a clergyman belonging to the father's faith, which laid no embargo on marriage between people of mixed blood; and this legitimized María Cayetuña, who was born soon after the marriage, although it did not preserve her from the stigma of mulatress.

It was, however, her father's wish, in gratitude to the convent for services rendered at the time of his daughter's birth, that she should be brought up as a Catholic, and, although the rules of the convent did not allow the reception of children of black or mixed blood, a great exception had been made in María Cayetuña's case: an exception whose magnitude she could not at present understand, but for which she must never cease to give thanks in her prayers. Her prayers must also be ceaselessly employed for the souls of her father and mother in purgatory, and for herself, that she might in her life expiate their sin—for sin it was, whatever might be heretical opinion.

It was a great deal for an eight-year-old mind to take in. María Cayetuña was frightened and impressed; she did not fully understand about the legitimacy; the chief point on which her small brain fastened was that her father was a rich and important person; that, heretic or not, he had been powerful enough to get her received into the convent, which she had grown dearly to love. Here indeed was rich material for such a romanticist as *La Quimérica*!—a web of glory for the fashioning of those dreams which were to become more real to her than the actual facts of her life.

As a mulatress, she was informed—and had her first experience of wincing from the term—she was not entitled to the sacraments of Holy Church; yet here, once more, the infinite benevolence of her guardians had exercised itself to procure an exception in her favour. With the rest of her little companions, she was to receive preparation for confirmation, when she would take on herself the responsibilities assumed by her god-parents—one of whom was the Abbess herself, another Don Jeronimo, whom she had never seen—at the time of her baptism. With what humility, with what ecstasies of self-abasement she must prepare herself to receive this transcendent benefit, which, in the whole history of the island, perhaps of Christendom, had never been accorded to any one in her position!

Neither humility nor self-abasement were in María Cayetuña's character; yet she was awfully overwhelmed. Had she been older, it would almost certainly have occurred to her to ask what, exactly, had procured her these benefits. Confused, solemn as an owl, she kissed her protectress's hand, vowing to be worthy of the lenity which had accorded her, a child of sin, a share in the kingdom of heaven.

III

"And that is all you remember? Yet it is not so very long ago. It is to be hoped, my child, that you cultivate a memory that will serve you better in the future," the Abbess was saying, as the reluctant sentences faltered into silence. "You are getting a big girl now."

"I know, Reverend Mother. I am thirteen and a half. And María Anunciata de las Fuentes is going to be married."

"Ah-ha!" said the Abbess. "So that's it."

María Cayetuña turned quickly on her stool; she might be told to turn back again, but she would for a moment face this old woman who, as she had begun to understand, held the whole of her destiny between the palms of her strong hands.

"Reverend Mother, what's going to happen to me?"

The two women—the very young and the very old—looked fully at each other, and between them, unrecognized by the younger, but known and admitted by the elder, ran a strong current of feminine sympathy. The older she grew, the more human, in a secular sense, grew the Abbess. She had tolerance, nowadays, for many things she would have repudiated in the years of her novitiate. After half a century of Gregorian chant, the music that revived in her ears was the music of her girlhood: the tunes to which she had danced in embassy ballrooms, the serenades to which she had listened behind the palm-wreathed *refajas* of Seville. She knew this girl would never make a religious, and yet . . . she had given her word.

"Are you not happy in Santa Clara?"

She did not order María Cayetuña to resume her original position; she did not even make a prohibitive gesture when the girl instinctively dragged the *velo* over her head before replying.

"I'm happy—because I don't know any other sort of happiness. There must be so much—outside Santa Clara."

"Not for you, my child," said the Abbess, meaningly and pitifully. Her face burned.

"Who will know I'm—I'm——?" No, she would never speak the word.

Without replying, the Abbess raised her hand and pointed to the *velo*.

"I'll shave it off! I'll wear a wig—like plenty of the French ladies do! I know they do, Reverend Mother—Lucía has told me. The girls who go home talk about all the good times they have—the dancing and entertainments. I haven't seen anything—except at the feasts. I've hardly been into the town——"

"You have indeed," said the Abbess slowly, "fallen into the sin of discontent. It is time you and I had a talk, my daughter. It seems I have delayed too long . . . but as one grows older, time passes so quickly, one is hardly conscious of its passing. You are thirteen years old, and we are obliged to think of the future." Yet she did not immediately continue; she picked up a turquoise-handled paper-knife from her side, and tapped lightly with the thin silver blade upon the table; her eyes went past María Cayetuña, to where the bright sunlight shook its gold upon the pots of basil along the balcony rail.

"For some months now," she went on presently, "I have been having bad

accounts of you. I am told you are lazy, inattentive and sometimes untruthful, and that on many occasions your conduct has been lacking in the humility which befits a Catholic, and which is particularly becoming from one in your position." Again she stopped. "Come here to me."

María Cayetuña rose, and, shaking down her wide white skirts, came to stand beside the Abbess's knee. Her heart was beating very fast and her breath came quickly between her parted lips. The Abbess held out her hand, and María Cayetuña hesitantly placed her narrow little palm within it. The beautiful, hard fingers closed over it strongly; it would have been impossible to run away. She began to tremble.

"Look at me. Now listen: and whatever intelligence you have, you must use it to understand what I am going to say to you.

"Although, according to English law and English heresy, you are the legitimate child of your parents—in the eyes of the true Church you are a bastard. No, there is no need to cry. I have always told you you are not to blame for it. Or cry, if you must, for humility—to think how many blessings and benefits you have been permitted to enjoy.

"Ever since you were four years old—since the news of your father's death came to Havana—you have been cared for and guarded like any Catholic child; no difference whatever has been made between you and your companions—or, if there was difference, it was to your advantage. Many allowances have been made, which would not have been granted to a little girl whose devout mother taught her her prayers at the same time as she guided her footsteps across the room. Since you were four, you have had not one but many mothers, who have tended you no less devotedly than if you had been their own; for the law of Catholicism is the law of love, and it is love that has ruled your life from the hour you were brought to Santa Clara.

"Yet this is not all the Church has done for you, my daughter."

The Abbess paused again. On the left of her carved chair, behind the long, polished table, a pair of painted globes, terrestrial and celestial, were tilted in their frames of dark walnut, reflecting in the soft, beautiful lacquering of their curved surfaces the distorted rectangles of the windows. The Abbess spun the terrestrial globe lightly with her left hand, while with the other she motioned María Cayetuña to come round the table. The little girl, still dazed, marvelling at the curious toy she had never before observed, obeyed. As she did so, her nostrils dilated with appreciation of the odd, aromatic scent that blew out of the Abbess's garments—a perfume, had she but known it, of medicaments; for there were many secret sores about that aging body that its owner's whims had for so long abused.

"Look at this. Do you know what it represents?"

María Cayetuña shook her head, then ducked it forward, triumphantly to identify a symbol painted on the rounded surface.

"That is a fish!"

"Fishes and ships on blue—that means the sea. This great ball stands for the world, and all the land and water that cover the earth's surface are painted on it."

"But the world is flat——"

"According to the discovery of our great venturer, Cristóbal Colón, the world is round, and whether you sail east or west you will, if you continue

long enough, come back to the point from which you started," said the Abbess patiently. If she had had her way, many more subjects would have been included in the scholastic curriculum; but public opinion was still strongly against the education of women. "Now look. Here, where I am pointing, is the island of Cuba."

María Cayetuña stared at a curved shape, hardly larger than the clipping from a finger nail, which, on account of its yellow colouring, reminded her vaguely of a banana. It did not seem to her in the least like Cuba.

"And here," continued the Abbess, "is the town of Havana."

A crimson spot? María Cayetuña came to the conclusion it was some new sort of guessing game, and looked up with sparkling eyes to observe:

"I see. You mean, it *stands for* Havana."

After a frowning glance to see if this was impudence, the Abbess continued.

"Every spot you see marked on the coloured patches, which are land, stands for a town, and has its name written beside it."

"But, Reverend Mother, who put them there?—and how do they know what to call them?"

The Abbess leaned back in deep, silent exasperation, which she conquered with a shake of the head.

"Come," she said briskly, "this is not a lesson in map-making, and you must ask fewer questions or we shall never be done. Here"—she moved the globe slightly—"is England, the country of your father."

"But it's the least of all!" Tears of disappointment spouted to her eyes. "That can't be England!" Her small hand wildly brushed the whole continent of Europe. "That must be England! Reverend Mother, you told me my father came from a great country—the greatest country in the world!"

"You will find out some day that greatness has nothing to do with size," was the severe rejoinder. "Those are the islands of Britain; the small one to the west is Irlanda, a wild and savage country, but true to the faith. The larger one is the home of your father's people. Look"—the fine, pointed finger slowly traced the north Atlantic, from the island of Cuba to the south-western extremity of Cornwall—"how far it is from Havana: that great distance across the seas."

It did not seem much of a distance to María Cayetuña, who was silent, swallowing her disillusionment.

"Here is Africa, your mother's country; and it was between here and here that your father's ship was lost on its way to his native town of Bristol, which is here in the West of England."

The little girl nodded politely. She was not impressed by geography, and wished her instructress would get on to something personal.

"In Bristol," went on the Abbess, motioning her back to her stool, "you have relatives; members of your father's family, bearing his name—and yours. When your father, Don Mateo, lost his life at sea, no one save myself, and a few others here in Cuba, knew that he had a daughter." She paused. "Your father was a man of importance, of property. . . ."

Importance? Property? Ignorant as she was, María Cayetuña knew that those words meant riches, and with the meaning of riches she was well acquainted. She had heard the boastings of the pupils, and marked the lavish dress and resplendent jewellery of ladies who came to visit their daughters in

the convent. She had been afflicted by the fact that there was no one to visit her—no one, on occasions like her birthday, or the many feasts, to bring her loaded baskets of confectionery, jewelled trinkets, brooches and bracelets of gold filigree, all of which, after they had been exhibited, had to be taken home again, or were locked away until their owners left the convent whose uniform admitted no such frivolous additions to its sobriety. Her heart quickened and her lips parted with eager breath.

"When your father died," continued the Abbess, "his relatives, very properly, assumed control over his property, which, in a case like that—a case of intestacy—goes to the next of kin. *You* were the next of kin, but no one knew of your existence; nor, when they learned, were they prepared to accept it. You would have been left penniless, a charge for life upon those who so far had taken care of you, if certain people, whom you do not even know by name, had not taken it on themselves to fight for your interests."

"Was—was it a great battle?" gasped María Cayetuña, seeing herself instantly as heroine of a crusade.

"The 'battle,'" said the Abbess dryly, "lasted for seven years, and no blood, but much ink, marked its progress."

She herself knew but few of the details of the tremendous opposition thrown up, not only by the family of Flood, whose remotest branches rose in righteous fury against the claims made on behalf of Matthew's half-breed daughter, but by the whole of English Protestantism, that cried Havoc upon the Papist plot to secure the Flood fortune for a girl whose future could well be foretold: of the patient and subtle rallying of Catholic support—not easy to secure, since many of the true faith declined, in spite of the marriage certificate, to accept María Cayetuña's legitimacy; of the peculiar difficulties laid by English law in the way of Catholic litigants, and of the dogged persistence shown by her supporters in the pursuit of their claim.

All this and more Don Jeronimo could have told her; but a little more than twelve months after his departure for England, the edict of 1767 had expelled the Jesuits from their livings in Spain and the Spanish West Indies, and confiscated their property. The priests were granted a small living allowance, but were forbidden to join any of the other religious orders. Don Jeronimo remained in France, to think matters over. He detested France and the French people, and the problem was, whether to make the best of relatively comfortable circumstances and freedom from interference, or to return, to accept his humiliation and enjoy the discreet provision he had made for some such contingency as this. The Governor, Buccarelli, was his good friend, and he was informed by Cuban correspondents (the Abbess among them) of the tact and good feeling with which he was carrying out his orders from the Consejo.

The Abbess longed for his return, for his moral support; for she shuddered sometimes to think of the responsibility with which her guilt-laden conscience was burdened. Yes; even Don Jeronimo had shrunk from her woman's daring. She chuckled dimly as she remembered the arguments, the sophistries, the sheer autocracy she had employed to drive him on his mission. And when the matter passed from her authority into higher hands, it was she who had groaned and traileed over the slowness of ecclesiastical machinery. They had swallowed much, it was pointed out to her, and now, apparently, were expected to swallow more. Well, since they had already swallowed the main

thing—which was the adoption of the mulatto child as a ward of Santa Clara—surely for their own good they could swallow the rest?

For months she had worked her argument: subjecting herself to the torments of journeying hither and thither in the great convent coach, consulting this and that authority, enlisting that distinguished party and the other in her cause: while a wretched creature called Vilchez—or maybe Villars—was dragged in and out of San Ysidro: while the little pawn in the game slobbered and rolled on her foster-mother's bosom, ignorant of it all. And on her recovery from the stroke that had laid her helpless, it was she who chose impatiently to exert her authority, in bringing the child from the cabin to the convent, and in starting her training as a member of a Catholic community. They might criticize her now; they would be quick to revoke their criticisms if her scheme succeeded.

"Is all the money mine, now?"

The question, twice repeated, penetrated at last the dark, retrospective wanderings of the Abbess's brain.

"It was five years," she answered, more to herself than her listener, "before the English courts gave leave to presume your father's death. Five years, in which there was nothing to do but watch, and watch . . ."

"But now?" The child's voice trembled with anxiety. "Am I rich? Have I houses and lands and money of my own, like María Anunciata de las Fuentes?"

The Abbess's eye grew cold. Of aristocratic family herself, she could not quite stomach this self-coupling of a child of mixed blood (and, *dios mio*, how mixed!) with the name of one for whose high breeding she had the utmost respect—though not, to do her justice, for the girl herself: who, in her opinion, was a conceited, upstart miss, conspicuously lacking in the virtues the convent prided itself on imparting.

"What use would such things be to you, who have never learnt the value of riches?"

"I—I could buy things," stammered the child. "I could buy things like the other girls are given. Guadalupe's mother brought her a bracelet the other day—oh, it was superb. And I—I could have a coach, and some horses, and—and slippers with painted heels"—breathlessly she drew on the resources of her dreams: themselves fed by the vast romantic that came to her at second hand through the chatter of the other pupils.

"And what would you do with such things in Santa Clara, where, as you know, they are not allowed?"

"I might pay visits."

"Who would you visit?"

It was the moment for the test. With an inward tightening, an outward courage she was far from feeling, María Cayetuña turned her eyes full upon her guardian.

"Lucía has asked me home with her, for Graciela's week."

There was a pause before the Abbess replied:

"What authority had she for such an invitation?"

"She—she said her sister-in-law would be sure to allow her. Please—please, Reverend Mother!" In her desperation she fell on her knees, laying her hands palm to palm. "Let me go with Lucía! I have never been any—"

where! I am thirteen years old, and I do not even know what the inside of an ordinary house is like! I have never spoken to anybody . . . except the Sisters and Don Federico——”

“How many would envy you, my daughter!” The Abbess sighed. “For thirteen years you have been surrounded by love and care, you have been protected from every danger and your every need has been supplied.”

“But, Reverend Mother, it can’t go on for ever!”

“Why not? Santa Clara is your home, will be your home as long as you show yourself worthy of it.”

“But—but I’ll have to get married some day!” A wave of crimson poured up the golden oval of her cheek.

All the hard, self-indulgent lines of the Abbess’s face melted into compassion as she leaned forward, with difficulty, to lay her hand on the child’s head.

“My daughter, you will never marry.”

For a moment she thought the girl was going to faint; her hand was on the bell, ready to summon the nun who waited always within call. But after a dreadful second, when she swayed and put out a trembling hand to steady herself, María Cayetuña said, in a humble, doubtful voice:

“Why not?”

“Come here,” said the Abbess. As María Cayetuña swayed towards her, she put out an arm, strong, solid like a man’s, and drew the small, dishonoured head to rest on her shoulder. “You will never marry, my child, because no Catholic is permitted to marry a mulatress.” The word was spoken in such a fashion that, for once, María Cayetuña did not flinch.

“But I’m not an ordinary m-mm——!” No, her lips would not shape the loathely word. “My parents were married, and I’m called by my father’s name!”

The Abbess shook her head.

“It is not enough.”

“But my father——!”

“Your father was a heretic.”

“Then I—I could marry a heretic.”

“What, you would betray the faith that has fostered you? Let me tell you,” said the Abbess, “what would have happened to you if you had been left to the heretics. You would have been out there—in the streets: snatching your food from garbage piles and carrying bundles of foul linen to the wash-house.” She felt the girl recoil and tightened her hold. “Your father, who was a good man, for all he was a heretic, knew well what your fate would be, and it was on that account he wished you to be brought up as a Catholic and have all the benefits of Catholic guardianship. Would you show ingratitude for such tender care?”

She surrendered the last remnants of her pride in a passion of tears.

“I am not ungrateful, and indeed, indeed I love you all!”

“Keep that love of yours, my daughter, for the Blessed Virgin and for her Son, our dear Lord Jesus Christ: and when your thoughts turn towards an earthly bridal——” The Abbess checked herself: the time had not come for that—not yet. “There is much comfort for you,” she went on briskly, “and one day, very soon, you and I shall talk of it. Now you will confess your sin to Don Federico, and you will pray that your heart may be cleansed

of pride and filled with the spirit of humility and sacrifice, for the sake of those who wronged you at your birth, and for the delivery of their souls out of purgatory. And you will pray that you may be delivered of vain dreaming, and that you may not be the cause of inciting your companions to the sin of disputatiousness." With a gentle push she set the child on her feet.

María Cayetuña made her customary reverence and stumbled towards the door. She was still crying, but her light and immature nature could not for long deliver itself to grief; nor could she ever bring herself to believe in the irrevocability of anything that was unpleasant, or threatened the airy fabric of her dreams.

The difficulty of making permanent impression on that quicksilverlike personality was one of the many problems her guardians faced. It seemed so far that the only stable element in her character was a sense of pride, of personal dignity which, while deploring, they strove to turn to advantage. She was a skilful needlewoman; then it was she who was chosen to execute the most delicate adornments of the chapel linen. She sang like a lark; so she was given the leading parts in the choir. And for these she was sedulously praised—although warned that she must render back such praise to God who had favoured her beyond her companions—and encourage to feel her own importance and responsibility in the little world of Santa Clara. But it was not enough, and that wise woman, the Abbess, had known it would not be enough, and now, old and sick as she was, braced herself for the next stage of her struggle.

CHAPTER III

I

"*Olá, Santiago! Qué romantico eres tu! Qué se guardan las muchachas!*"

"And what are you doing, my lovely sister, like a bright bird in a cage?" returned Santiago, not to be outdone in compliment.

They laughed at each other—he from the back of his high chestnut stallion, and she from the *reja* that guarded the immense balconies of the Palacio de Ajoche, whose façade he was crossing on his way into the town. The unconventionality and freedom of the condesa's behaviour, which discomposed and annoyed her husband, charmed Santiago; the insolence with which, as now, she, calling into the street like a serving-maid, flouted public opinion, seemed to him worthy of the de Lorchas, who were a law unto themselves, and took pride in offending the sticklers for propriety.

"Well, you will not have the impudence to ride past, like a cavalier avoiding his discarded mistress's balcony?" she mocked him. She detached a rose from her corsage and flung it down to him—for all the world as though he were her suitor; and he, in continuance of the comedy, caught it, touched it with his lips and thrust its long, smooth stalk through the strap of his wide-brimmed hat, where it lay glowing against his dark hair.

A moment later the two stood bosom to bosom, a glowing couple, each with the same dark eyes, the same brilliant and mocking smile; each finding in the other the mirrored semblance of his own good looks, abounding physical energy and vivid personality. From childhood they had loved each other passionately, jealously, and with that curious intimacy that sometimes accompanies consanguinity; and, growing older, had cared nothing for the gossip their unconcealed preference for each other's society aroused. "If Isabela were not my sister I would make her my mistress," was a thought frequently in Santiago's mind; and, in Isabela's, "*Dios mio*, why could I not have married a man like Santiago?"

"*Y los toros?*" she asked him, after their greetings. His eyes narrowed with affectionate amusement at this tribute to his ruling passion.

"Very well. I am glad you remembered to ask after my little bulls."

"Which Papa disapproves of as much as ever? He complains you neglect the plantation for your ranch."

"There are plenty of people to look after the sugar, and why shouldn't cattle be as paying a proposition as muscovado, if they are properly handled?"

"Why not, indeed." She smoothed back a lock of her hair with a gesture of exquisite mockery.

"Listen, Isabelita." He flung himself on a couch, looking up at her with the eagerness he brought always to the discussion of his favourite subject. "I see no reason why Cuban bulls should not be as famous as those of Castilla Vieja. We have a better climate, richer pasture—and, if this strain succeeds, why shouldn't Lorchas be as much in demand in Spain as they are on the island?"

"And what about getting them there?"

"Bah! If we can ship slaves we can ship cattle."

"I don't see how you are to ship fighting bulls. They'll either savage themselves out on the journey, or they'll be so tame by the time they get there that they'll eat out of the *toreros*' hands!"

Santiago shot an amused, appreciative glance at his sister before replying in a superior fashion:

"Leave me to deal with bulls, *hermancita mia*, and reserve your wisdom for the human race. You might, for instance, concentrate your charms on Father, who has turned uncommonly tight-fisted, just when a little paternal generosity would have come in useful!" He laughed, and dodged to avoid the light blow she aimed at his ear.

"I don't suppose he sees the good of Buonaventura money streaming across the boundaries to raise your cattle."

"Buonaventura money! We could make three times as much," scoffed Santiago, "if Papa would give up his old-fashioned methods and invest in new plant—like they have over at San Juan de Remedios. In fact, if things go on they are, you'll all have reason to be thankful for my bulls. The ranch will certainly be worth more than the plantation in a few years' time."

"I shall be coming up to Buonaventura in a week or two, so you may mark down a couple of beasts for my amusement. *Dios!* It's months since I had the *vara* under my arm." The condesa de Coria was one of the few Cuban ladies who themselves dallied with the sport of bullfighting; it was said she could place a pair of darts as neatly as her brother, although her lack of weight prevented her equalling him with the *vara*. "I shall need a little diversion after next week's affairs!" She tapped her foot in the high-heeled scarlet slipper petulantly. "I must say I didn't bargain for sisters-in-law when I married."

"What is it this time, my poor, victimized sister?" was the amused rejoinder.

"You know that Sunday night is the reception—at which, I may remind you, I've ordered your favourite, La Mariposa, to appear. I suppose she will get a new dress out of you for the occasion? All right; don't spend too much on beautiful dancing girls, all the same, for there will be a great deal of expense this week, and I may not care to show Diego all of the bills!"

Don Diego disapproved strongly of his wife's extravagance in dress, her love for gambling and her carelessness in all money matters, and Santiago had several times extracted his sister from a compromising situation, and saved her a scolding, by settling accounts she did not care to bring to her husband's eyes. "Not that I am afraid," she would declare, with perfect truth, "but nothing so upsets my health and puts me in a rage as stupid wrangling over a few guineas."

"Now, who are you bringing?" she continued. "I hope they are very presentable, for it's to be an extremely formal affair, stuffed with all the nobility, from the Governor downwards!"

"So far I have Fernando Cascados, Ferroblanco and Cantarell," he informed her, "and if you want to know what they are doing at present, I'll wager the price of that latest diamond you've acquired they're at the hosier's, getting fitted out with all there is of most elegant in small clothes, to do honour to the occasion. Cascados, by the way, has an eye for Lucía! At least, so his brother

informs me. It's not possible, is it? I thought the brat was hardly out of her cradle!"

The Condesa fixed a considering eye, and bit the tip of a polished fingernail.

"She has begged to come home with Graciela for her 'week.' She's nearly twelve, she has only another year in Santa Clara—and I'll see they don't make her into a nun, if I've got anything to do with it. I was thinking, in fact, that you might help me to find a husband for her."

"You're not expecting me to set up as a marriage broker, are you?" he grimaced.

"Now, listen, brother. Lucía is far too lively a little thing to fit into a convent, and she deserves a nice husband. In fact, she's the only one of those tallow-faced de Coria women worth troubling about, and I positively rely on you to bring some of your friends and give them a chance of seeing what a treasure they will miss if they allow Diego's gloomy airs and corpse-candle speeches to scare them away from the Palacio Aroche!"

"I wonder you don't suggest my marrying her myself," lazily returned Santiago, who saw perfectly through his sister's scheming, and could barely restrain his laughter at her air of transparent innocence.

"Now that you speak of it, the idea would not be a bad one."

"What? You are really so anxious to dispose of me?"

The bright blood ran up her cheek. No one knew better than Isabela de Coria how bitterly she would resent the woman who came to monopolize her brother's affections and the first of his consideration.

"I am sure Lucía would make a most untroublesome wife, and Diego is bound to give her a handsome dowry," she persisted. "Think how useful that would be on your ranch. But they will very soon be making plans for her, so do, pray, think seriously of it. A hint to Diego would be sufficient for the present——" Her own experience was enough to show her that affections did not necessarily enter into matrimony, and her knowledge of Santiago assured her that a man of his temperament was not likely to become infatuated with her little sister-in-law.

"I advise you to keep your fingers out of that pie," frowned Santiago, with masculine discretion. "The de Corias have probably got their own ideas about her future——"

"Ideas! We know what their ideas amount to," scornfully returned Isabela. "Eight girls in the family, and only two of them with husbands! Four dowries already swallowed up by the Church, and another joining them next week!"

Knowing from experience the futility of opposing Isabela when her mind was set on a project, Santiago made some evasive reply. He quite saw through the thought at the back of his sister's suggestion; it was high time he was married, and marriage with a de Coria was a proposition not lightly to be dismissed.

The chapetone family of de Coria had held office under the Consejo de las Indias at Madrid through the greater part of the century, amassing enormous personal fortune through their successful manipulation of contraband, whose proceeds they had invested in their plantations.

What the de Lorchas lacked, however, in tradition, they made up in stamina. Tall, handsome, vigorous—abounding, both men and women, in virility that singled them out in any company they chose to frequent—their beauty had

challenged the aristocracy for several generations. Isabela de Lorch was not the first to make an aristocratic marriage; it was said on the island that the de Lorchas could take their pick, where and how they pleased. It was perhaps something to do with this fact that had disposed Santiago to take his time. Like the majority of young creoles, he preferred the irresponsibility of dalliance with light loves to assuming the cares of a family; and, as his sister well knew, he had been for several years the lover of a married lady of Havana. It was not, however, a suitable subject for discussion between them. Isabela fixed her dark eyes on her brother, and summed up his possibilities from a woman's point of view. She decided that they were very great.

"I suppose he's on his way to Asunción Gamborena. I wonder what he sees in her—so pale and sly, like a vixen!" she was thinking. "If it wasn't Santiago, I should wish her husband would find out; but I can't have my little brother carved up—even to provide a distraction in this dulllest of all cities! Yes; you are certainly a lady-killer, my dear brother. But we must see you kill something worth your hunting; twenty-eight is too old to go gallivanting in this fashion."

She was astute enough, sensing his unwillingness to continue the subject, to change it, moving restlessly to the window opposite that which overlooked the street. This one gave on a dark, over-vegetated patio, crowded with old orange trees, whose sombre foliage was barely relieved by the small withered fruit, and concealed the melancholy dripping of little fountains.

"How I detest this house!" she cried, more for something to say than because she had previously given much thought to it. When the condesa's mind was disturbed no matter was too trivial to fall under the shadow of her displeasure.

"It does not compare unfavourably with Buonaventura!—or with the ranch-house, for a matter of that. I can't get Papa to spend a penny on either of them; I shall have to threaten him with taking a house in town if he doesn't have the roofs repaired before the rains begin."

"Oh, Santiago! How delightful that would be! To be near each other all the time——!" Her face was radiant.

He caught her hand and drew her towards him, and there was something sombre and reckless in the look he gave her.

"Perhaps we are already too much together for Diego's liking."

"Take care!" She snatched her hand away. "There are spies everywhere in this place."

"If a brother may not take his sister's hand——!"

The look she flashed at him, that he returned, had in it so little that was fraternal that each remained for a moment motionless and aghast, as at the betrayal of a secret neither had previously acknowledged. It was he who first recovered his sang-froid, lifting his weight indolently from the couch on which it had been spread.

"Well, as I have business in the town, it is time I was going. *Adios, hermancita mia*; I shall be at all your revels—excepting on Thursday, when we are shifting some of the stock from Guabanca up to Guatala, and I'm not leaving that to hired hands—not for all the beauties in Havana!"

"Oh—why on Thursday?" cried Isabela, much put out by this *bouleverse-*

ment of her plans. "That's the Posy Dance, and I thought it was your best chance of getting acquainted with——"

"At least your pretty protégée is sure of another string to her bow! Fernando would not miss it for the world," he interrupted with a laugh, and his spurs clanged along the gallery.

She ran to the balcony to see him mount his horse, which, at the first touch of his spurs, reared like a unicorn and tore across the square, scattering a cluster of terrified porters whose baskets fell from their heads and poured their contents of fruit and grain into the gutters. In the best tradition of the Cuban *hidalgo*, Santiago scattered a handful of small coin, to compensate these miserables for their misfortune; for pure devilment he made the stallion caracole round the fountain, and then, the cynosure of all eyes, plunged into the tunnel of one of the narrow streets.

II

"You would think they could afford a little fresh paint at least! *Por dios*, where is Graciela? Are we to sit the whole morning with the stench of wax in our noses?"

"Oh, Isabela, is that the new mantilla? How well it becomes you! Graciela? She's upstairs, saying her prayers; she's gone all religious already. Oh, please, Isabela, I don't want to be religious!"

"Give me my fan, child," said the condesa, smiling at her thoughts. It was gratifying that Lucía had grown into a very pretty creature, who both in looks and in natural docility would lend herself to the plans her sister-in-law had in mind for her. "How you have grown! It really seems a pity you have still another year in the convent."

"I don't mind, so long as you find me a husband," said Lucía frankly. "We have plenty of fun among ourselves—and I should not like to leave María Cayetuña just yet. Oh!—I had nearly forgotten! Please, Isabela *mia*, may I bring María Cayetuña home with me? Oh, do let me, please. I told her I would ask you—she is so sweet, and she never gets invited anywhere, Isabela; not even for the holidays."

The condesa shrugged her shoulders impatiently. Without being unkind, there was a strong streak of selfishness in her nature, and she had no intention of burdening herself with more charges during Graciela's festival week. Nor did she care for the responsibility of having convent girls, other than her sisters-in-law, who would be strictly duenna-ed, under her roof, when the place would be teeming with society gallants. Isabela, who enjoyed drama, had nevertheless no mind to be put to the inconvenience of figuring in a local *cause célèbre*.

"Don't be tiresome, Lucía. You will have quite enough to do without playing with children of your own age; you must learn to make yourself attractive, and how to behave in company; and if you are clever, and say the right things and look the right way, you will perhaps find a husband for yourself."

"But, Isabela—so might María Cayetuña. She is two years older than I, and she is terribly worried because no one has proposed for her hand, so far."

"That is an affair for her family; why don't they do something about it?" asked Isabela carelessly.

"She hasn't got a family; her father and mother are dead."

"Well, it's no business of mine," the condesa was saying, when Graciela came into the room and curtsied meekly to her sister-in-law. At sixteen she had already the reserved, secret look of the religious; tall and very thin, her bloodless cheeks spoke of the ecstasies of self-mortification; she was nervously fingering the scapular that hung from its cord over the flat bosom of her convent gown.

"Well, I hope you are ready at last. Have you told them to put your baggage in the coach?"

"I have no baggage, señora," said Graciela faintly. Unlike Lucía, she never addressed her sister-in-law by her Christian name. "We have no possessions; all that we have is dedicated to Our Lord."

"Humph!" said Isabela. "You aren't a nun yet, you know. By the end of the week you may have changed your mind. Now come along, and for goodness' sake make up your mind to enjoy yourself; I suppose you are not forbidden to show appreciation for all the trouble that has been taken for you?"

The girl's stillness, her close resemblance to her half-brother, irritated the condesa. Don Estebán de Coria had married twice; Diego and the four already cloistered sisters were children of the first marriage, Graciela and Lucía, with their elder brother Juan, now at the Franciscan seminary, of the second. It sometimes horrified Isabela to see how the fanatical religious strain of the de Corias persisted through both marriages. If she ever had a child of her own, she was determined it should never see the inside of a nunnery.

"And María Cayetuña?" Lucía was persisting.

The condesa turned exasperatedly to the elder girl.

"Who is this María Cayetuña, Lucía is making such a fuss about?"

A look of faint disconcertion appeared in the blank eyes of Graciela.

"She—she——" she stammered. "She is the mulatress."

"What?" The condesa flung back the crossed ends of her mantilla to hear better. She knew, of course, as all Havana knew, about the half-breed girl who, for some reason, had been taken into Santa Clara; a few strict Catholic families had made a fuss, one or two had even removed their daughters. This all revived the old 1765 scandal—and Isabela adored scandal, bitterly regretting that she was too young to have enjoyed this one at first hand. Her eyes sparkled as she said:

"So that's who you've chosen for your bosom friend at Santa Clara! I should think Diego will have something to say about that!"

"She may be a mulatress," Lucía was crying, with tears in her eyes, "but we are forbidden to use that word, and it is mean of Graciela to say it, for she was just as friendly as I was with María Cayetuña before she started to be religious! And María Cayetuña isn't an ordinary mulatress, for her father was an English *grande*, and her mother was an *infanta*, if she was black!"

"We all know about that," said the condesa, who had been wearing the white *velo* and pleated gown of the convent pupils when the scandal took place. "And now come along. Of course I can't ask the girl home with you, Lucía; what on earth would your brother say? All the same," she added, "I would like to see her some time, and you can take her a present when you come back, if you choose."

The girl was probably remarkable; Isabela knew how striking the newly arrived African negress could be; she had also had ample opportunity of observing the results of mixed unions on the Buonaventura plantation. Her mother, a gay, high-spirited creature, had flatly refused to go on bearing children after the births of Santiago and Isabela, and Don Carlos had made no trouble about it, having plenty of outlet for his propagative instincts among the members of his household. Santiago and Isabela had at least twenty half-brothers and sisters, whose parentage was good-humouredly acknowledged by everybody, and who occupied more or less privileged posts about the house or on the plantation. It amused Don Carlos's legitimate children, often, to observe that several of these offshoots of their father's roving fancy were as tall, quite as good-looking and hardly darker in colour than themselves. One of them, Carola, was Isabela's body-servant, and had been standing in a corner of the parlour throughout the conversation. She now picked up the sunshade that was to protect the condesa's complexion from the blazing noonday sun, between the door and the coach; it was an affectation of the mode, for when did Isabela de Coria, who would gallop for miles in all weathers on their country estate, trouble about a complexion as exquisitely unalterable as amber?

"I suppose you have said good-bye to the Abbess?" she turned back to inquire.

"Yes, señora; last night, after Compline." Graciela lifted her thin left hand, which had been concealed in the voluminous white folds of her gown. "The Reverend Mother gave me this letter, to deliver to my brother. Will you take charge of it?"

The condesa glanced at the fine, bold hand that decorated the folded paper with its superscription.

"That old woman will live for ever," she muttered, as she stepped into the coach. She had not been a favourite with the Abbess, who, for all her admiration for high spirits, found it hard to deal with the sheer lawlessness and defiance of authority that were the *señorita de Lorcha's*.

The coach rolled smoothly over the improved curbing of wood-block and tar which was Governor Buccarelli's innovation during the rebuilding after the siege. The young novice's eyes stared dully at the world which was hers—only for seven more days; her small, damp fingers, slipping along the rosary, followed her prayers to be preserved from temptation during this crucial week.

III

"Ay, what a voice!" mumbled old Sister Angustias, at the end of the singing class. "I have only once heard such another."

"And whose was that?"

The old woman chuckled, tucked her hands in her sleeves and was delivered of the nods and winks which signalled she was about to share a confidence.

"It was many years ago, before you were born. I was a worldly young girl, you know—very fond of going to dances and the opera."

"Oh, tell us about that—please, *please*, Sister Angustias!"

The Sister shook her head.

"Thanks to Our Lord's grace, I remember very little. But I can hear her

voice as if it was yesterday: Carmen Betis, they called her. *Madre mía de mi alma*, it was a nightingale! And when she came into the lights, with the great jewels flashing over her from head to foot, ladies and gentlemen in the audience would tear off their ornaments and throw them on the platform at her feet."

"*Dio' mio!*" breathed her listener.

"Yes, she was rich, rich beyond power to tell: for they would pay anything to hear her, and she had carriages drawn by six white horses and all the kings and princes for her admirers."

"And you say my voice is like hers?"

The old woman set her head on one side.

"Pray God it does not bring you to her end."

"What was her end?" María Cayetuña sighed, for she had grown mistrustful of these stories with bright beginnings and sombre endings that the nuns were fond of telling.

"Oh, she found peace at last," said Sister Angustias, comfortably evasive. "But not till she had learned the deceitfulness of pomp and riches, and, sick at heart, turned to the bosom of Our Lord."

"Did she give up singing?" asked María Cayetuña, in deep disappointment.

"She has found eternal peace in the cloister," said Sister Angustias, and trotted quietly away.

"I've heard of Carmen Betis." Catalina Ferroblanco nodded a triumphant head. "Oh, yes, dear me! She was a very famous person. My grandfather had an affair with her."

"Did she marry him?" María Cayetuña's eyes strained towards the speaker.

"*Tontal!* Opera singers and actresses don't need to marry. They become the mistresses of matadores or princes or members of the aristocracy." Catalina tossed her veil back with a fine assumption of worldly wisdom.

"Oh, but isn't that wicked?" It was perfectly understood, at least among the older girls, that after you were married you took a lover, almost as a matter of course; but for an unmarried person to entertain amorous advances was regarded as no less immoral than it was imprudent.

"It's all a question of what class you belong to," said Catalina, who seemed to be very well informed on this subject. "People of the theatre are a class by themselves; the common ones are no better than *putas*——"

"Oh, Catalina, what a word to use!"

"But the famous ones," went on Catalina, ignoring the prim expostulation from one of the other pupils, "make their own rules and arrange their lives just as it suits them."

"And what do they do about confession?" sniggered another.

María Cayetuña's mind performed a trick it was always doing: it drifted delicately and absently away from the discussion. It was not that she was not interested in the burning subject of love, that occupied the minds of the girls of her own age almost to the exclusion of every other; it was that in their endless discussions she sensed in some subconscious fashion a coarseness of fibre that somehow would not weave itself into the delicate texture of her dreams. Little materialists, they sought unceasingly to probe the *why* and *when* and *how*—particularly the *how*—of things; while she soared always towards the exquisitely vague, towards an only partly conceived elysium,

towards an ethereal consummation of some ideal relationship such as could never exist outside of a child's dream. It was a conception all mixed up with her love for the Blessed Virgin, it contained elements of the ecstasy which sometimes flowed over her when kneeling in the chapel, looking upwards with clasped hands and parted lips to the tall Figure with the Child upon its arm, in its long robe of blue enamel hemmed with golden stars and its jewelled crown. One day she found herself praying: "Oh, please, Blessed Virgin, let me have a little baby like yours some day!"

But when her companions dwelt upon the subject of having babies, with a wealth of obstetric detail that would have astonished the nuns, again her mind darted aside, seeking protection from crude fact in the realms of fancy. Always the aftermath of the singing class was, for her, an access of dreaming, for, while singing, she would pretend that she stood alone, upon a lighted stage, in front of a thousand people, and a prince would fall in love with her voice. . . . She had tried hard to conquer these naughty departures from the path of duty and attention, but it seemed as though she were powerless to do so; from the first strain of music that floated under the rafters she was possessed by her dream, and the end of the class was an awakening against which she struggled with the persistence of a drowsy child.

Many excuses were being made, in those days, to draw her away from the company of the girls she liked best—most of them younger than herself—and to include her in the older, more sober community of the pupils who had either started their novitiate or were thinking of becoming nuns. "You are getting too big now, always to be playing with the little ones," she was told. She did not object to being separated from María Anunciata and Guadalupe, but Lucía was another story. How long it seemed since Lucía went away! Yet it was only a couple of days.

The girls with whom she was now expected to consort were a dull crowd, and seemed to have nothing in their heads but pleasing the nuns, preparing their confessions and printing verses from the Scriptures on bits of parchment, which were then coloured and illuminated, as presents for their favourite companions. They were not interested in María Cayetuña's stories, which had gained her prestige among the younger children; a particularly plain, self-righteous pupil of fourteen, foredoomed to be a Beata, and jealous of the charm in which she, poor girl, was woefully lacking, condemned them roundly as lies—since María Cayetuña's romances were always told in the first person.

"And he drew out his sword, of which the hilt was crusted with sapphires and rubies, and laid it at my feet, saying: 'My sword, whose name is Valor, I dedicate to you, señorita, and to the magnificent and illustrious memory of your father, who was a *grande* of Inglaterra, for whose sake as well as for the absolute dominion you have gained over my heart, I am for ever at your feet!'"

"What a stupendous and unpardonable lie!" burst out the resentful one.

María Cayetuña started from her trance, moistened her lips, allowed her hands, which had been extended in a gesture of ineffable graciousness, to fall to her sides.

She smiled very gently at the speaker.

"No, it was not a lie, Luisa. I was telling you a story to entertain you; didn't you understand?"

"You *meant* us to believe it!" accused the other.

"Are not the best stories the ones that are meant to be believed? Me, I think always they are the only ones worth while."

The other girls held themselves prudently apart from the discussion; they did not want to get into trouble with the nuns, neither did any of them care enough for either of the protagonists to quarrel over them.

María Cayetuña gave her gentle sigh and rose from the bench on which she had perched for this recital.

"I am sorry if my story has offended you, Luisa; I will try to remember not to annoy you again."

She was trying so hard to be good, these days, and people were most uncomfortably kind and loving to her. Each of the nuns devised in turn some little treat for her diversion. When the pedlar paid his monthly visit to the convent, with materials for the pupils' needlework, she was sent for to help choose among the bright silks and varied threads—a task she enjoyed, for she had an eye as keen as a parrot's for colour, and the gleaming textures called out all of her starved sensuality.

She was initiated into the making of the famous convent mangrove-grape jam, and spent a whole morning stoning the tiny pear-shaped fruits, with a cotton wrapper tied over her white gown; but she did not care for domesticity, and preferred eating fruit to preparing it for table. She made herself sick and earned a penance for gorging on fried banana.

Sister Angustias taught her "Hail, Thou Resplendent Star," and promised she should sing it in chapel after the Sunday mass; but even this rare honour did not console María Cayetuña for Lucía's absence, and for the lively stream of chatter of the pupils whose company she was unable—although she was not directly forbidden—to frequent.

As an almost unheard-of privilege, she was allowed to accompany two of the nuns when they went into the town on a charitable errand: and departed in the convent *volante*, crushed between the thick, blue-robed figures, across whose mountainous robes she could catch no more than a glimpse of the scenes through which they passed.

And what scenes! Mounted cavaliers in elegant three-cornered hats (the sombrero was forbidden by law in 1767), the thrust of a wandering bull against the frail wheels of their vehicle, mantilla-ed beauties sunning themselves on balconies, and, down near the harbour, most enthralling sight of all, the Governor's barge setting forth, with its twenty liveried oarsmen and all its pomp of paintwork and gilt, to ferry His Excellency across to the Morro.

Were such sights as these sedative to a person in María Cayetuña's frame of mind? It was a misjudgment on the part of the Abbess—she made few—who only sought to make her present environment attractive to the restless little girl. She realized her mistake when one of the nuns brought word, on their return, of a hysterical crying fit that had overcome their charge, almost before the *volante* had re-entered the gates of Santa Clara. María Cayetuña was now lying on a seat in the garden, weeping her eyes out, inattentive to all efforts to console her.

The Abbess's face hardened.

"*Bueno*," she said, and stretched out her hand to the bell. "We must take stronger measures."

An idea had come into her mind—an idea as yet so vague, so difficult to reduce to intelligible form, that she had barely started to grasp its possibilities. It had something to do with the unfortunate de Coria signature on the famous marriage certificate, which, as may be remembered, had disappeared before an honest man named Clark had had time to destroy this evidence of a discreditable episode; and something to do with the stiff-necked support the de Corias (with that one unfortunate exception) had always given to the Church; and something with the child who lay sobbing on the garden bench—the pawn, the victim of the Church's resolution to reap advantage from its bygone complaisance.

IV

The green blinds were drawn across the arches of the gallery, holding out the heat from the condesa's well-earned repose. She and her household had attended a theatrical performance the previous night, had gone up to sup with the Governor, and she had only summoned her servant to undress her when the patio and all its surrounding criollo roofs were roseate with the morning sun. Her plans, moreover, were going nicely; Santiago had been quite impressed with Lucía, who, dressed in rose-patterned brocade, wearing her first mantilla and the comb which, but for its buttressings of carnation, would never have balanced in her soft, childish hair, bore herself with commendable self-possession that was enhanced by her elder sister's awkward unhappiness amid the revels she was briefly sampling. Oh, yes, there was something to be made of Lucía! And after that, thank heaven, no more gawky sisters-in-law to be manœuvred into the cloister.

She had barely settled to rest, when an interruption set the blood throbbing in her veins, and her teeth clenched themselves to hold back the irritation her husband's presence always roused in her. Diego, long, thin and dolorific, with the air of confessionals about him! Why on earth had he ever chosen to marry a woman like her, whom he must have known at a glance to be the antithesis of all that de Coria wives were expected to be?

Don Diego dismissed her attendant with a wave of his long, grotesquely narrow hand, as he entered from the interior. He cast a suspicious look round the apartment; perhaps he could smell the aroma of Santiago's riding-boots, the strong aromatic perfume that the young man wore, like the majority of Cuban bucks, on his hair? Santiago, who had conducted her back from the Residency, had, as was his custom, remained to gossip while her maid undressed her—and had only just departed for his beloved ranch, from which none of his sister's persuasions would woo him for the Posy Dance.

"I must ask your pardon for disturbing your rest," Don Diego was saying in his pedantic fashion, with the lisped Castilian sibilants that made her cringe with distaste. "But I have had no opportunity for speaking to you on a matter that needs your immediate attention."

"Surely it can wait until I have had my sleep?" she asked petulantly. "I cannot be expected to have my wits about me when I am perishing for a little rest?"

"I shall not be here later, as Don Pablo Jiménez has asked me to his laboratory to watch a new experiment."

Always this huddling together with priests, under cover of scientific interests! She darted a look of scorn from the cover of her lashes—which softened as she reflected that she had science to thank for relieving her a good many times of her husband's company. Science was the conde's hobby, which pleased him the more that it brought him into constant association with the priesthood; and in nervous moments Isabela thought with horror how easy it would be for him to devise a means of poisoning her, should she too openly defy his authority. Poisoning was a method much favoured on the island for disposing of troublesome or inconvenient individuals, and there had been poisoning scandals well within Isabela's memory in several highly placed families, when a slave paid the penalty for a crime whose author continued to sun himself in public favour, although universally recognized to be the responsible party.

"Oh, very well. What is the matter?"

The narrow figure of the conde seemed to hang, skeleton-like, against the green backing of the *persanas*.

"Yesterday afternoon the Abbess of Santa Clara sent for me to ask my co-operation in a matter that affects the future of one of the pupils," he told her precisely.

"Really? I had no idea that you interested yourself in any of Lucía's school-fellows," she responded, with closed eyes.

"It is the mulatress, who goes by the name of María Cayetuña Fludd."

"*Dios mio*, what have you to do with that affair?" Her boredom vanished, the condesa sat up with lively interest.

"Nothing," he answered coldly, "save that I am, not unnaturally, displeased that my sister should have struck up an intimate friendship with this person of dubious birth; I wish it had been brought earlier to my attention."

"Well, you need not blame me for it. I knew nothing until Lucía surprised me the other day by asking my permission to invite the girl to stay with us for Graciela's week!"

"You refused?" he asked quickly.

"What do you suppose? I know enough of your family," was her contemptuous reply, "to guess the kind of reception she would get here—apart from a friendship like that being no use to Lucía."

"You should have referred the matter to me," he quietly replied. "What are your plans for to-day?"

"There is nothing in particular until this evening—they are getting the house ready for the Posy Dance."

"*Bueno*. That will do. In the course of the morning, or afternoon, you will send the coach to Santa Clara for the mulatress."

"Upon my soul!" said the daughter of de Lorchas with spirit. "I am not one of your servants, to carry out orders without asking why or wherefore! Tell me about this plot you have been hatching with the Abbess, and I am completely at your disposal; but you cannot expect me to take much interest, or help you to carry it through, unless I am in your confidence. Pray sit down and tell me all about it; I adore plots, and I'm already quite wide awake with excitement!"

It was the frivolous aspect of her character that most offended him, and he

sat reluctantly; but he was astute enough to realize that this aspect was the one to serve him now.

"Like the rest of Havana, you know the history of the mulatress. . . ."

"I know the scandal of the Casa Rodríguez and all about the mock marriage and the document that was signed by your cousin Pedro," said the condesa incautiously. She could guess it galled him to have the de Coria name associated with so discreditable a procedure. "I know that the heretics consider the marriage legal and that the girl is supposed to be heiress to a fabulous fortune. *Dios*, what a pity she's a half-breed! One could arrange an excellent marriage for her——"

"Her guardians have other plans. She is to enter the convent."

"Oh! Ah! I suppose so." The condesa nodded her head appreciatively.

"That will be a very good thing for Santa Clara, will it not?"

"It appears, however, that the girl is rebellious, and that all persuasion, so far, has failed to convince her of the wisdom of those who control her future."

"And was it for that the Abbess called you in?" The sardonic tang in his wife's voice did not escape the conde's attention. He answered stiffly:

"It is natural that the Abbess should rely upon a family like ours to supply the secular influence she needs in a case of this kind. If you will give me your full attention . . ."

He spoke for half an hour; rapidly, with the concentration of one who has considered every possible aspect of the matter in hand, recapitulating and underlining when necessary, impersonal, cold and positive, as he invariably was when any matter of domestic or family politics was under consideration. As usual, she found herself chafing under his repetitions; passing from interest to boredom and at last to an intolerable weariness; she could barely stifle her yawns by the time he was done.

"I shall see that all goes as you wish. Will you not now let me have a little sleep? For I can hardly be expected to remember all your instructions when I am worn out for lack of repose!"

"All will be arranged, and there will be no call for the exercise of your memory." His scornful, heavy-lidded eyes betrayed Don Diego's opinion of feminine reliability. "All I request is your vigilance, that nothing is—disorganized," he concluded, as though the word had been difficult to find. "By the way, is your brother among the guests to-night?"

"No; is shifting some cattle, and sleeps at Buonaventura." She saw that the information gave him satisfaction.

"I will not disturb you again. After my visit to Don Pablo, I shall have a number of people to see."

She turned her head on the pillow to look at him. Why was Diego concerning himself so much about a matter which would hardly appear to be his business? Was it merely in order to oblige the Abbess of Santa Clara, who, autocratic as she might be, and far-reaching as was her scope of influence, was certainly not the ruler of Havana?

"The Abbess should be much gratified by your assiduity in carrying out her requests, *esposo mio*."

"This matter goes beyond the Abbess"—but he spoke absently.

She became suddenly alert, her senses warning her that he might be about

to persecute her with his cold lust, before which her ardent body shrank into insensibility.

"Then good-bye," she said hurriedly, drawing the coverings about her naked shoulders

"You are very pale."

"Is it any wonder, considering the hour I came to bed?"

To her relief, he withdrew, but Isabela was too roused by now to reconsider sleep. She called her servant and bade her bring the morning chocolate.

Well, if they were bent on making the mulatto girl a nun, it was their affair; but they seemed to be taking a great deal of trouble about it. The condesa, who, despite her husband's low opinion, was no fool, came to the shrewd conclusion that Diego's intervention was his method of wiping out the disgraceful signature whose existence had remained, for fourteen years, a blot on the de Coria escutcheon.

CHAPTER IV

I

ALL day long, and part of the previous day, the girls and their dueñas had been preparing the room for the Posy Dance: their dueñas, the "Beata" aunts and cousins who emerged from their dim obscurity on such occasions as this to a certain brief importance; for it was they who knew best, having assisted at so many similar celebrations, how the green branches should be arranged to make an arbour, and of what blossoms the bouquets should be composed—since there were some flowers it was highly improper for a virgin to hand to a young man, and others whose innocent message of invitation was quite permissible.

This custom of the Posy Dance, soon to become obsolete, was among the most charming social customs of the Spanish provinces; it was much favoured by young people, for it provided an informal occasion for the girls to meet their admirers, and, taking place just at the hour of lighting candles, gave a romantic background to romantic scenes. It was less favoured by dueñas, who had their work cut out, in that delicate light and among the slyly arranged greenery, to make sure no improprieties took place: which it may be taken for granted they did, since the maidens of Havana were no less inventive than the gallants when it came to the evasion of their guardians.

At five o'clock, the hour of sundown, when the musicians were tuning up in their garlanded eyrie, Lucía dancing with delight, took María Cayetufía by the hand and led her into the arbour.

"Is it not lovely? It is like a piece of forest! I do declare, they have never done it so well before," she averred. "Aren't the candles pretty like that—all wreathed round with flowers? And here—look—arranged all round the fountain to keep them fresh—are the bouquets the ladies offer to the gentlemen. *Ay-ay!* I want that one of *ilathera*, with the sprays of *mimosa*!—but I suppose it will be *Graciela's* since the dance is all for her."

María Cayetufía moved as though in a dream. Her great dark eyes burned like lamps in her exquisite little face; her movements were all of airy fluency, already she moved her hands to the music which was to come. A remote, a delicate air enfolded her and the convent dress she was still wearing seemed to spread itself like the bell of a great white flower. She could not yet believe any of it: her summons to the parour, the incredible news broken to her by the Abbess, the thousand injunctions as to speech and behaviour poured into her humming ears, the arrival of the coach, blazoned with the arms of *de Coria* and *Aroche*, that had transported her to this paradise.

Lucía flung her arms round her friend in a transport of excitement.

"And all the gentlemen will be fighting to dance with you! You must be careful to whom you give your bouquet—it might easily start a duel, for the men here are so very jealous! There was a fight at the *Ferrol Blanco* dance, and somebody was killed. Wait until you feel me nudge you—I'll pick somebody who is not likely to start a scandal," promised Lucía.

"Oh, no, I would rather choose for myself!" breathed María Cayetuña, not minded to surrender the least glory of this transcendent occasion.

"The only pity is that it is not a real Posy Dance," said Lucía regretfully. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the doors are supposed to be thrown open and every passer-by comes in. That is sometimes very amusing, for one has people you would never meet in the ordinary sort of way! Oh, no; in comparison this is rather a stiff and grand sort of affair. My brother Diego does not care for dancing, and he told Isabela that we had got to be more proper than usual—because of Graciela. I do wish Graciela would look as though she was enjoying herself. There is nothing against having a good time, even if you are going to be a nun. Come now: it's time we put on our combs and mantillas."

She could hardly breathe—in that green, green bower, filled with the scent of fresh flowers and plants, the song of caged birds, the exotic perfumes of women, whose elaborate gestures made of each one a performer upon her particular stage: with the deep voices of men, their formal yet purposeful movements, that carried each in veiled pursuit of the charmer who had captured his taste for the evening. It was the first time she had ever seen men like this—men in a mass, men close to, so close that the back of her hand brushed now and again a brocaded coat-tail, the pressure of a calf forced the stiffened flounces of her gown against trembling knees.

So drenched was she in new sensation that she forgot to notice the many glances cast in her direction: the furtive curiosity of women, the equally furtive admiration of men. She sank and rose in her flounces (the convent pupils were well drilled in polite observances) when it seemed expected of her; she kept her fan for the greater part of the time well in front of her burning lips: but across its painted half-moon her eyes burned too, like those fatal stars that are said to lead mariners to their doom in uncharted seas.

The mantilla given to her by the condesa covered her head; unlike Lucía, she had no trouble in making the comb stand up in her hair like wiry moss. To conceal the front that the lace left uncovered she had been at first at her wits' end: then had had the inspiration of pressing the crescent of roses, intended to be worn against the base of the comb, in front, close down on her brow, so that no hair was visible. The result was odd and demure, yet provocative beyond words, and one may be sure it caught the eyes of the women. María Cayetuña, on her first appearance in society, had all unwittingly set a fashion—which, it may be said, became few as it became her.

She was happy, in a compressed, concentrated fashion that felt as though it would burst through her bosom. Every one, excepting one of the "Beata" aunts, a vicious Catholic, had treated her as though she were one of themselves: and as for the aunts—it had not taken María Cayetuña long to find out how little their opinion went for. She was abject with admiration for the condesa, whose hand she was taken to kiss immediately on entering the house. The conde was with his wife at the time: María Cayetuña knew one did not kiss the hands of gentlemen, but she curtsied, with her most beguiling upward smile, and was disconcerted to receive a stiff bow, together with a look that gave the impression that the conde de Coria found something unpleasant in her appearance? Was it the hair?—which she had taken great pains to con-

ceal between the little lace *velo* that replaced her convent coif? These, however, were but trifles beside the fact that she was having a wonderful treat.

The assembly, which seemed vast to the inexperienced little girl, was small enough for a Posy Dance; it did not even, as Lucía had pointed out, fulfil the obligations of such a function, since the few guests were there by invitation, and not in response to the lordly Havanese gesture of open house that excluded no one who had a mind to admire the decorations and take a turn or two in the fandango. But the *de Corias* did not encourage such indiscriminate mingling with their neighbours; it had also been considered indiscreet, on account of Graciela—who stood, pale as death, with miserable eyes, at her *dueña's* side: clutching her bouquet in a hand that trembled with confusion, her eyes ever and anon roving to her confessor, who sat benignly among the spectators. Oh, yes, thought the *condesa*, viewing her sister-in-law from afar, there was no doubt about Graciela's vocation! In her dress of white and gold brocade she was stiff as a waxen effigy. It was for her to present the first bouquet, which inaugurated the ball.

The ordeal should not have been so very great, thought María Cayetuña, whose own bouquet was burning her fingers—she was so impatient to present it: and she had already in her mind chosen its recipient, a tall, red-haired youth who, under the eye of the *dueña*, was paying ardent court to a young lady whose plainness was amply compensated by her elegance and her sparkling manners. It would be great fun to get him away from his *inamorata*!

What was Graciela making all the to-do about? It was not as though any of the company were strangers to her—Lucía had said that all the men were relations, or close friends of the family. But at last the bouquet was presented—or rather, pushed into the hand of a prearranged partner. ("That's cousin Sixto; isn't he a fop?" whispered Lucía, as she gathered her skirts in preparation for her curtsy to the partner she had been magnetizing with her eye for the last quarter of an hour. "And here's Pedro Ferroblanco coming to ask you! Now you must flirt a great deal and make him mad about you, for he's quite worth considering as a husband.")

The music sounded through the green garlands; María Cayetuña was struck too dumb to respond to the formal presentation of her partner—she was out on the floor, dancing her first minuet.

What a mercy it was, she reflected, keeping her sharp eyes on the nearest couple to correct and guide her, that some of the pupils' parents insisted upon their being taught dancing in the convent. She had never been one of the happy little party that went off, under the close guard of two of the nuns, to pirouette and tap their heels to the tune of señor Villalta's guitar in the cloisters; but she had had the good fortune to discover a window which overlooked the dancing class, and, since movement was an instinct with her, had picked up enough to save her being at a disadvantage on the present occasion. With every point and balance she became more confident; the movement flowed from her like water, and several spectators murmured that it was a pity about La Flood—she would make a very great dancer indeed.

She did not, in her happiness, perceive a note of constraint, an awkwardness that overhung the company—much less connect it with herself. She knew she was having a success with Pedro Ferroblanco, whose dark eyes kept sending unutterable messages into hers, and she pitied Graciela, of whom she now

and then caught a glimpse, bending the knees which should surely have gained elasticity in her genuflexions, woodenly in response to her partner's bow, giving the tips of her fingers with reluctance, once—what a disgrace!—stumbling on the hem of her gown: and never, never lifting those eyes that she kept fixed on the ground as though there, and only there, lay her salvation.

The dance ended, another bouquet was presented, the music went on. María Cayetuña and Lucía, beckoned to the condesa's table, were given candied limes to quench their thirst, and glasses of sweet golden wine.

"Well, child, are you enjoying your first dance?"

"*Si, si, señora!*" There were no words to express her joy.

The condesa turned her head away, frowning a little. Why could not Diego keep his finger out of these convent plots? And why couldn't they marry the girl, obviously so wasted on the life that was decreed for her? There were plenty of men of her own kind—wealthy *monteros*, who had made enough out of managing the plantations to buy property of their own, who would think themselves lucky to get a wife like that.

"Are you doing as Diego told us?" one young man muttered aside to another, in a pause between the dances. His companion shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose so. At least—I may make an excuse to leave before the affair takes place."

"That is a good idea; perhaps I shall follow your example. One has always an excuse for not being in the room at certain moments! But Ferrolblanco: what about him?"

"I know nothing about him; what do you mean?"

"You'd better take him away with you. If he fails to keep his word to Diego—which he vows he will not—it will occasion a very awkward situation between the families. What's more, he swears he will kill himself if the girl won't have him."

"What?—in *marriage*?" There was proper horror in the voice of Don Sixto Aroche, second cousin to the conde de Coria.

"*Hombre*, you don't think Ferrolblanco will risk climbing in through convent windows?"

"Then nothing else is possible," said the other stiffly, "for even if her future were not already arranged, the Church would never countenance such procedure."

Meanwhile, the subject of this uneasy conversation went like a butterfly through the mazes of the dance, her heart swelling with happy pride. Lucía was beaming and nodding at her with delight; several of the ladies looked less contented; one tossed her head and moved pointedly away, finding María Cayetuña at her side, and the faces of the "Beata" aunts and cousins, who rarely left their seats along the walls, save to pin a lady's torn flounce or to superintend the servants, were of stone. The condesa too was frowning: not as though she were vexed with María Cayetuña, but as though she had something at the back of her mind that was disturbing her. And all these things only served to quicken her sense of victory over the company, which, although it was composed of the best Havanese families, was obliged to acknowledge her charms.

She had laid her bouquet by the fountain to refresh it; she listened eagerly

between each of the dances to see whether her turn had come, but the lot had never yet fallen on her. The lots were drawn by the condesa herself, who dipped her hand into a deep bowl and brought out a coloured slip on which was written the name of a lady. She had taken care that María Cayetuña's had not come up in the earlier drawings; by now she was wishing it need never appear at all. Carefully as she had planned the diversion which was to cover the incident, which might occasion some embarrassment, she would now have given a good deal to revoke it. There was no positive cruelty in Isabela's nature, for all her hardness. Well—here it came; and it was fortunate for Diego that his influence in Havana was so great that few people cared to break their word to him.

Gaily she tripped to reclaim her bouquet, and, to gain time, shook off the fountain-drops that clustered on its blossoms. When she returned to the condesa, by whose side all the presentations took place, the room seemed for a moment strangely empty. But what did she care? She looked up at the bright drops of the chandeliers, dripping through the festoons of leafage, and it seemed to her the most exquisite moment of her life. The candles flickered in the draught of the ladies' fans, and their wax made graceful spirals about their long, slim shapes, like—like—she shivered and withdrew her eyes from them: like nuns going to chapel.

She smiled brilliantly, took a glance about her, and, sinking with inimitable grace into her curtsey, held out her bouquet to the one of her first choice—the tall, red-haired man who, as though anticipating his honour, had detached himself from the rest of the company, to stand almost facing her.

The red-haired man approached with the insolent grace of the practised courtier, and it was only as he stooped to raise her that the icy directness of his close-set eyes gave her misgivings. This was surely not the look of a favoured partner. While she doubted, he bent, kissed her gloved wrist bearing the bouquet, bowed, and walked away. The bouquet was still in her hand.

Wild with confusion, she could not at first think what it meant. Had she made some mistake?—omitted some point of etiquette? She had, so far as she knew, done exactly as the other ladies had done before her. Helplessly, like a snubbed child, she held out her bouquet at random—now to one and now to another. The gentlemen—if they were worthy the name—mindful of their word to the conde, stood like images, although most of them cursed the cowardice of their companions, who had found excuses to leave the room; and each knew that he could not have done this to a woman of his own class. There was some sort of commotion by the door, a smothered cry, and the quick eye of the condesa saw Pedro Ferroblando being bundled out by two of his friends. She did not think the less of him for it.

"We have had enough dancing for the present; let us have a little entertainment." At her imperious gesture the orchestra launched its boldest march, and some dwarfs came tumbling in to amuse the company with their antics. The servants came forward with their trays of refreshments, and the dead silence which had held the assembly broke into a hurried sibilance of chatter.

María Cayetuña understood. She did not understand that she had been the victim of a brutal trick planned by her guardians for the accomplishment of their designs, but she knew that they would not accept her bouquet because she was a mulatress. She was surrounded by hard faces, a few of them

ashamed, but these were in a minority, for sensibility was not, in those days, prized as a virtue among the aristocracy. Some of the ladies did not now hesitate to show their offence at being asked to a party which included a half-breed; these were not party to Don Diego's secret, which, had they known of it, would have struck them as an amusing joke, for many of the strict island Catholics carried their contempt of the half-breed population almost to the point of hatred, and were ready to lend themselves to anything that would exclude them from society. The only tender, pitiful face was Lucía's—horror-stricken, shining with her tears. The condesa signed to one of the aunts to take the two little girls away, and turned to her circle of ladies to explain the meaning of the incident.

II

She had not slept. Sharing Lucía's bed, she lay awake, while the great white globe of the moon travelled across the starry heavens. Lucía had cried herself to sleep, clasping her friend in her arms, but as sleep took her, María Cayetuña gently freed herself and lay apart, wrapped in her lonely thoughts.

So they had been right; there was no place for a mulatress in the world that belonged to María Anunciata de las Fuentes and her friends. Beauty and grace were not enough to make a place for one doomed in the hour of her birth to that dim half-world to which belonged every street-corner slut, every garbage sweeper, the yellow loungers who stuck cigars between their bad teeth and behaved as though they were kings of the earth until a white person came along, the heavy-breasted women with their heads tied up in filthy clouts and sore-eyed babies in their arms—and María Cayetuña Flood.

Almost, in her bitterness, she wished she had been left in the cabin—to know no other life save that one of degradation and squalor; but from that memory, even now, her soul darted away. Her father, Don Mateo, the English *grande*, could not have meant her to be like them, or he would not have wished her to be brought up in the convent.

For the first time, María Cayetuña tried to visualize her mother, and as the picture of a negress—as she knew negresses—grew before her inner eye, her whole being fused into a flame of hate. It was her mother's fault that she was what she was: her mother who had bequeathed to her the loathed hair—she tore at it as though she would drag it out of her scalp, but of that compact and powerful mass hardly a thread came loose, to twine about her fevered fingers. God, how she hated her mother! Oddly enough, it did not occur to her to blame her father for giving her such a one.

The moonlight was filtering into dawn when she got up to get herself a drink of water. She cast a glance of loathing at the negress who slept across the threshold of the girls' bedroom. Her mother had been like that—flat-nosed, rubber-lipped, with receding brainless forehead on which the wool twisted in tight screws. As she drank thirstily, letting the water from the ewer splash down the bosom of her night-shift, she could dimly see Graciela, on the narrow couch she had insisted upon occupying since coming home, stretched starkly, like a figure on a tomb; her hands were folded on her

breast, upon her thin, unconscious features there lay an almost terrible calm, as though she had already entered into her peace. Her sole comment on the incident to her one-time friend was, "You must pray Our Lord to comfort you and bring you to His peace." Yes, Graciela had learned her lesson; her remoteness from all that concerns sinful man was the typical remoteness of the novice, or the newly received nun.

The hatred burning in her heart reached out and licked Graciela with its unclean flame; yet there was more of despair than of hatred in her heart now. In a few years' time she would lie as Graciela now lay, stretched on her pallet in the narrow cell, empty of all that means life, a mouthpiece for holy precepts. . . . The impulse came on her to rush back to Santa Clara and get it over.

Somewhere a cracked bell was ringing for the first prayers of the day; presently other bells would join in, and all the air of Havana would be set trembling and echoing with the summons of the Church to its faithful.

The girls' room did not open on the gallery; the Palacio Aroche being one of the few three-storied houses in the town, they were given one of the lofty chambers of the top floor. It had one window, unglazed but shuttered, and guarded by a magnificent *reja*. Below, the stonework shot down precipitate, with no gutter pipe or ridge to encourage a would-be raider. The Aroches had known how to look after their virgins, but one forgets which Aroche lady had come to the conclusion that, although their daughters must be preserved at all costs from the marauding male, there was no harm in whetting the latter's fancy by allowing him to see the beauties at his formal disposal.

The window was placed high in the wall—higher than the top of María Cayetúña's head; but two shallow steps led up to it, and, by standing on tiptoe and supporting herself by the rails, she had no difficulty in seeing into the street, whose shadows of violet were melting to the rose-grey of a pigeon's breast in the coming dawn.

The garbage sweepers were at their malodorous work, while the patient asses stood beneath the weight of their panniers, into which with languid movements was shovelled the refuse of the day. But for them the street was empty; presently they were gone, moving on like somnambulists to their next task.

Heralded by the delicate clapping of hooves, a horse and its rider came into sight—and she gasped with admiration at the spectacle. On a high chestnut horse, whose harness gleamed with bosses of gold and silver, and whose taut stirrup straps were of scarlet leather, rode a man in white. The rising sun smote across his chest, turning the jacket to a breastplate of silver; all below was dipped in the shadow, as though the rider and his mount swam towards her through a deep, translucent lake. She hardly knew which was the more beautiful: the horse with its flowing mane and tail like a floating grey cloud, or the man with his hand planted on the thigh and his back hollowed to display the narrow waist folded with crimson. She drew a long breath, pressing her face against the *reja*, and suddenly, with an irrepressible gesture, flung out an arm between the bars.

He could not have seen it, for he was looking straight ahead, but some instinct prompted him, seemingly, to look up, and he reined in his horse so savagely that it slid and reared to preserve its balance.

Rising in his stirrups, Santiago gazed, as though he could not credit his senses, at the girl smiling down on him. He knew it for the window of his sisters' chamber, but he could not for his life think who was the owner of this lovely, subtle little face, gilded with the dawn, dewy of eye and lip, radiant with a smile that had something of heartbreak about it.

Wheeling the stallion, he swept round in a circle that took him to the other side of the street, whence he could see better, and while the spirited creature backed and tossed its head, remained gazing upwards, unable to take his eyes from this incredible vision.

And she? What was a girl of thirteen to do, when first she met the dark, refulgent eye, the short, classic nose with its flaring nostrils, the full, sensual lips that had ensnared Asunción Gamborena, La Mariposa, Escarlata Inclán? She was wild for escape, she had never seen a man who so completely realized her romantic ideal, and she was ready to leap out of the window—sixty feet—to get to him. Fortunately there were the *rejas* to prevent her.

He could not fail to see her eagerness, and it sent fire through every vein in his body. The women of Cuba, shackled by convention, were most of them hardened coquettes, leading on their lovers to extremities of despair before satisfying them: but this child—she seemed little more—was ripe already for the delights of love, and Santiago de Lorcha, a little weary of the stale procession of romantic adventures which followed always the same pattern, saw the possibility of a new one, so fresh and exquisite that his daring leapt towards it.

For he knew, suddenly, who she was. Yes! His eye, like a hawk's, picked out the betraying hair, which María Cayetúña had forgotten, and which made a crisp aureole on either side her ardent little face. It gave her the look of a young and lovely witch, and there was something fantastic about her gestures, about the white teeth that flashed in a smile that was not a smile, but some desperate summons, that bore out the superhuman suggestion. How in the name of God did she come to be in his brother-in-law's house?

His hand went to his heart in a gesture of whose significance she could hardly, for all her convent upbringing, be ignorant, while, with the other, he swept his hat from his head. The reins, dropping on his horse's neck, caused it to shy, and he made no more of it than if he and his mount were one, gripping the barrel with thighs whose muscles strained against the pale chamois of his breeches. Then, as sounds warned him of the approach of other riders, he rode away down the street, his horse's tail flicking the shadows, looking across his shoulder, to the very end. . . .

She did not know that he entered the house; but she knew as she crept cautiously down the steps and back into bed that, even for her, life still held something, after all.

"What mischief are you at, Isabelita? Come, you had better confess to me, for you know I shall find out in the end."

The condesa was pale and fretful; she had had enough of playing hostess on behalf of one who showed no gratitude for her efforts, and she was still annoyed that Santiago had missed the opportunities of the Posy Dance for bringing matters to a head between him and Lucía. How he had heard of the

mulatress she could not imagine, and she knew it was useless to question him. He stood over her, his hands on his hips, and there was a hardness in his eyes that annoyed and a little frightened her. The only person Isabela de Coria had ever feared was her brother.

"You can surely see that it pays occasionally to be acquiescent to one's husband," she pouted.

"I notice your acquiescence does not carry you so far as providing him with a child," was the cool retort.

Isabela shrank, and the breath came hissing between her teeth. How dared he remind her of that? The recollection of the bitter drugs and potions she had swallowed, each time she found herself threatened with a pregnancy, scalded her palate. She hated children, and would not waste her zestful youth in childbearing, if she could help it; but she shuddered to imagine Diego's reprisals, if he should ever come to suspect what she was doing.

"What business is that of yours? And how dare you criticize my actions, which have nothing to do with you?"

"It was a dirty trick, *hermana mia*," said Santiago in a low voice. "And if you repeat it, or lend yourself to any more convent roguery, I might find myself obliged to let Diego know why he has not been gratified with an heir. Good-bye; I am glad to leave you in a rage with me, Isabelita, since it means you will be all the more charmed to see me when I come again!"

He left her breathless, more than a little terrified, and racking her brains to think of the reason for the extraordinary conversation.

III

The Abbess, it was remarked, was making a pet of María Cayetuña: a state of affairs which did not go down well with some of the pupils. María Cayetuña was for ever about the Abbess's parlour, dusting, watering the pot-plants, sometimes transcribing, in her laborious schoolgirl hand, passages marked for her in the Abbess's books of reference. Many of them were in foreign languages, in Latin or French, and she had not the remotest notion of their import; but she went slowly, and seldom made mistakes.

Sometimes, when the Abbess was taking a rest from her literary labours, she would talk to the girl, trying to win her confidence. Always the responses came readily, with a polite, gentle dignity, but the Abbess was not fool enough to imagine that she penetrated the reserve which was drawn like a veil between María Cayetuña's thoughts and her words. Not seldom she spoke of her father.

"That is the chair he sat in," she would say, pointing; María Cayetuña's face gave no sign, although her heart throbbed. "Do you want to know what he looked like? He was tall; the tallest man, I think, I have ever seen—and broad in proportion. In his rages people must have found him formidable." She chuckled, as though it gave her satisfaction to remember that she, for one, had not been intimidated by Matthew Flood's anger. "I should not have been surprised to see him put his arms round the pillars of the balcony, and, like Samson, pull them down!"

"Was he angry when he was here?"

"Oh, yes," said the Abbess easily. "As angry as you might expect a man to be who has been fooled by his own certainties!"

This was beyond the scope of María Cayetuña's understanding; she waited, pen in hand, for the Abbess to continue; as she did not, she asked:

"Am I like him, to look at?"

The Abbess shook her head.

"No; on a woman such looks as his would be grotesque—although no doubt he passed as handsome among those who were not unduly particular. There was a rugged hardness, a kind of brutality about his good looks, that spoilt him for the fastidious. But he was striking; one would not forget a person like that.—Plague take the girl," she was thinking, "why need she be so unnecessarily beautiful?—though that pallor of hers these days is not too becoming; I had better get Don Pablo to order her a dose of bark.—In other ways, less fortunate, you resemble him; you have certainly got your share of his stubbornness—and his pride," she stabbed.

María Cayetuña lifted reproachful lids upon her tormentor.

"I have not been proud, or stubborn, these last three days, Reverend Mother."

"No, that is true." The Abbess's eyes looked cunningly at her. "You have discovered, perhaps, that the world is not so desirable a place as, in your ignorance, you imagined it to be?"

The girl's eyes fell, her hand trembled. The Abbess saw the trembling, and, after a moment's hesitation, put her next question.

"You enjoyed your visit to the conde de Coria's?"

She lifted her head slowly, and seemed to balance it upon the long, translucent stalk of her throat, before replying.

"With your permission—very much."

"*Bueno*," said the Abbess, on so satirical a note of satisfaction that the girl's fingers jerked into tightness on the handle of her pen. "I have, by the way, a present for you; I had meant to show it to you some time ago, for, actually, it is your own."

She unlocked a drawer, to take from its corner a ring of old, pale gold, which she placed in the palm of the girl's hand. María Cayetuña looked at it with curiosity, but without admiration; the ring she admired was the sapphire on the Abbess's little finger, in its deep setting of gold and antique silver. She had often wanted to look at the mysterious intaglio cut into the surface of the gem.

"There is writing on it, Reverend Mother?"

"*Gloria virtutis umbra*; glory is the shadow of virtue. It belonged, I suppose, to your father. It was found on your mother's hand, after she was dead."

She gave a gasp, dropping the ring as though it burned her; an expression of loathing blasted her small, sensitive face.

"Pick that up," commanded the stern voice of the Abbess, "and give it to me." She locked it away again in the drawer. "If ever you leave Santa Clara, that will be yours. And when you think bitterly of your mother, remember that she also was the victim of your father's lust."

"Please—I don't want it. I don't want anything belonging to my mother!"

"Do you think that way you can do away with the facts of your parentage? Come here, my child. Do you not know that I, of all on earth, am your best friend? Why lie to me about your visit to the Palacio Aroche? I know all that there took place; I grieve for the pain it was necessary to inflict on you, to bring you to knowledge of the fact that, for such as you, there is no life outside of the convent. This is the life your father willed for you: because he knew what we all know now—that there can be neither happiness nor safety in the world of men for one cursed at birth like his unhappy child. Your father loved you, when he placed you in our care; never forget that. He had little faith, but at least he was a man of his word: which is the more strange since he knew two gods only—himself and temporal wealth. Both brought him evil, and through both he was destroyed. Nor did the destruction rest there; for both you and your mother were made to pay the price of his self-indulgence. Yet, had he lived, I believe he would have come to the true Cross: for, strange at it may seem, in the light of all I have told you, he was not a bad man. He had many virtues: not the least of which was his care for you, and for that, my child, you owe him much." The Abbess paused. "You are not neglecting your prayers for your father's soul?"

"No, Reverend Mother."

"Such sin as his may not gain remission by prayer alone; you know that?"

She bent her head, perfectly understanding the drift of the plea, which had been made, in this or other forms, before.

"It is in your power to give him life eternal. How small a sacrifice for one so deeply beholden as you, my daughter! It is time," the Abbess said slowly, "you were entering your novitiate."

María Cayetuña started so violently that the round ruler on the table against which she was leaning was shaken to the floor. She put her hand to her throat, which felt as if it were bursting. Was it the end of all hope? Had she to relinquish the dreams born in that dawn hour when joy swam towards her on a white horse, and held up hands of escape?

All sorts of convent impressions came crowding in on her, stifling her with their innocent monotony: the faint, all-pervasive scent of wax and incense, the smell of the refectory at meal-times, the changeless, ancient smell of Santa Clara itself, that she could feel even in her most intimate garments; the pupils coming and going, growing from little children to young eligibles of thirteen or fourteen years, the unalterable ripple of gossip, the sense of painful seclusion from a world that burned and throbbed and fulminated against the very walls, the ceaseless sense of frustration that came from watching others escape, the days punctuated only by the tinkle of bells, the nuns who went about their duties with an air of finding ecstasy in the mere fact of repetition, the slow withering of flesh. . . . She opened her mouth to give a cry which, even in the effort, she felt borne back by the sheer weight of the inescapable.

"Have you finished your transcription?" the Abbess was saying. "Good; there are faults—but it will do. Now, here is a little plan to copy, and you see the drawings in this book, which is quite out of date, are inaccurate; you must correct it by reference to the globes."

After a moment's hesitation, she lowered her head, drew aside the white

volume of her petticoats and sat down. While Havana basked in its sunshine, while its narrow streets rang with the venders' cries, while the *volantes* halted, and eager traders came to their doors to display their wares for the elegant occupants; while Asunción Gamborena read her lover's *billets-doux* and the condesa quarrelled with the dressmaker about her newest gown. while the conde and his friend Don Pablo pored over crucibles and Santiago de Lorcha galloped across the pastures of Buonaventura, María Cayetuña sat in a convent silence, disturbed only by the rustle of the Abbess's gown, making hopeless signs and symbols upon a sheet of vellum.

CHAPTER V

I

ALL Havana had poured into the streets, crowded the balconies and thronged the sidewalks, heedless of the sun that turned stone and wood and tar to singeing heat from which tenderer flesh winced, although it seemed to make no odds to the small boys and girls who rushed barefoot through the crowds, rattling their *guiros*—the little dry gourds filled with pebbles or grain which were always accompaniment to Cuban festival. Balconies were gay with fans and parasols, with embroidered shawls whose delicate fringes hung lifeless in the simmering air; while on the wide plaza before the principal entrance to Santa Clara there was quite an assembly of *volantes*, whose elegant occupants, under their canopies, had chosen this shady point of vantage for the spectacle.

The few windows of Santa Clara which overlooked the plaza were crowded with the pupils and novices, raised upon tiers, which gave them the look of banked white blossoms behind the *rejas*, and among these there was a constant fluttering of handkerchiefs, which was acknowledged by their friends and relations in the crowd below.

At last—at last—the procession was coming; its approach could be marked by the crescendo of shouts and applause from the narrow streets along which it must proceed before reaching the plaza. The little pupils' excitement was almost unbearable, and it was like the plump Catalina to lean over so far as to get her head jammed between the bars of the *reja*, from which it was finally extracted amid loud cries of protestation from her companions, who feared to lose part of the spectacle through Catalina's stupidity.

Here they came—the young negroes whose flashing teeth were no whiter than the garments of festival they wore: swinging their cassolettes from which perfume distilled itself in scented clouds, whirling the handfuls of aromatic leaves joyfully through the air—to the shrill, sweet voices of the children, who made their own music with drums, *guiros* and *gaboulets* as they stamped and pranced upon the paving-blocks through which the tar ran iridescent in the blazing sun.

Then came the crystalline chiming of bells, and there were the six splendid *de Coria* mules, only used for state occasions, their harness blazing with colour and precious stones, drawing at walking pace the great coach, towards whose open windows many of the spectators pressed, to exchange greetings and shake hands with its unseen occupants. The hum of the plaza rose to cheering, all fans were fluttered and scarves of lace or bright silk were waved by those who would not risk the press of the populace to approach the carriage.

As its escort the coach had six gentlemen on horseback—at sight of whom many a pupil clutched her bosom and groped for the sympathetic hand of her neighbour. Ay, what gentlemen! María Anunciata de las Fuentes identified them in superior tones, for the benefit of the less well informed of her companions.

“On the left, the first is Juan de Coria, the younger brother of the conde;

behind him is Sixto Aroche, a cousin—and the one in front on the other side is an Aroche also: I forget his name. Behind Sixto is Pedro Ferroblanco" (she did not need telling that, thought María Cayetuña, whose ears were pricked, although she feigned proudly to ignore María Anunciata's exposition; besides, her eyes were fixed beyond—beyond——) "and the other two are Jaime Valdés and the famous Santiago de Lorcha, the condesa's brother——" She exchanged sly glances with her nearest neighbours. The exploits of Don Santiago were a favourite topic with the older pupils, and rivalled those of Molina's *Don Juan*.

Thank heaven she had a seat in the front tier of the galleries that had been erected for this event at the convent windows! She sat still as an image, her hands clenched together in her lap, her little face like a carving in pale bronze, wondering whether he would look up, while the procession formed itself across the plaza, in a line facing the great doors of the convent that would presently be opened to receive Christ's Bride—Graciela, who, half-swooning under her crown of flowers, ghostlike in the gown of white brocade crusted with diamonds, pressed back in her corner of the coach to avoid the eyes of her well-wishers.

She had forgotten Graciela—although she had briefly envied her this day of glory. She wondered only whether he would look up, before the gates opened and the procession passed through.

The children, the negroes and the itinerant population had drawn aside to either side the entrance, and were held back by the military guard, while the riders wheeled their horses outward, then turned in to face the coach. Widely spaced, they stood there, each man a statue, each horse as still, save for lashings of tail and tossings of head to beat away the flies whose buzzing made almost the only sound in the quiet that had fallen.

Suddenly the great bell of Santa Clara shook its deep, quivering note over the awed assembly; at the same time, almost beneath their feet, the pupils felt the rumbling of the seldom-opened gates as they swung inwards. One girl gave a little scream of hysteria, so unbearably tense the atmosphere had become. Blushing for her, María Cayetuña had next minute cause to be grateful, for the thread of sound had carried to the people below, and, as the negro gathered up his reins, and the mules moved jingling forward, Santiago looked up quickly.

She knew he had seen her, from the instant darkening of his eyes, and even from that distance his colour deepened, as with a sudden suffusion of blood. The beating of her heart nearly choked her.

The coach with its footmen had disappeared, and now the six gentlemen turned and rode slowly in its wake. Having fulfilled their duties as escort, they had time, seemingly, to think of their own affairs, and more than one pupil flamed like a rose and sank giggling back, not daring, under the nuns' eyes, to return the salute. Both the Aroche cousins had, seemingly, inamoratas in Santa Clara; Juan de Coria turned upwards a youthful face full of charm and scattered his smiling regard without prejudice all over the flower-bed; Jaime Valdés selected the bridling Guadalupe for his attentions, and Pedro Ferroblanco's eyes roved in agony—obviously trying to distinguish his lady among all those identical white *velos* and gathered bodices. He even went so far as to make feint of dropping his switch, to give himself a little more time

to conduct the research; and this incident served Santiago well, for, his way blocked by Jaime's horse, he continued to sit calmly in the sunlight, smiling up at María Cayetuña with a look that possessed her before them all.

"Do not be troubled; I shall have you in the end," his smile said; then, leisurely replacing his hat, he rode forward behind the disappointed Pedro, who, being somewhat shortsighted, had failed in his search.

"*Dios mio*, did you see de Lorcha? Who is it? Who is it?" the pupils were whispering.

"I expect it is me," simpered María Anunciata.

María Cayetuña's eyelids fluttered as she rose from the bench, which had begun to feel very hard; but she felt as though she were carrying the sun in her breast.

The pupils and novices filed away to the refectory, where they partook of the midday meal while the guests regaled themselves in the state apartments reserved for the dignitaries who sometimes visited Santa Clara. The usual strict rule of silence was relaxed for this day of festival, and although the nuns stood on guard to quell any unseemly outbreak of chatter, a steady hum of conversation went on, the main thread of which concerned itself with Santiago de Lorcha.

"María Cayetuña, was it you?" whispered little Lucía, who had returned the night before, so as to have a seat of vantage for her sister's reception.

"It—it might be," she admitted, after a cautious glance round.

"But when has he seen you? You didn't meet the morning they came to fetch you back."

María Cayetuña shook her head; no, she felt sure the Condesa had taken care of that. She did not feel that she could betray the lovely secret of their first encounter, even to Lucía.

"But it would be too—too wonderful!" breathed Lucía. "I should see you constantly, because Santiago is Isabela's brother. But he's rather old for you, isn't he—and everybody says he's got dozens of ladies!"

"He won't—after he knows me," said María Cayetuña, with happy confidence. "Swear not to tell a soul, Lucía!"

"I swear! And it won't be at all difficult for him to send messages to you," went on the practical Lucía, "for I get a basket of presents and sweets from home most weeks, and he can easily pop a note among them."

At three o'clock began the tolling of the convent bell, which brought sobriety into the demeanour of the most frivolous of the pupils. The dolorous notes, wide-spaced, quivered in the flower-bedecked colonnades, along which they paced to the chapel. In the heart of each was the chill sensation that comes before a death. When that bell ceased tolling, Graciela would be dead to them all. A few of the little girls began to cry quietly. Life was so beautiful, and death so unutterably sad.

As they took their places in their stalls, not a few glances were turned towards the grill behind which were faintly visible the still forms of the nuns who, not so long ago, some of them, and others very, very long, had driven up to the convent gates in their white robes and crowns of flowers to give themselves to the mystical Bridegroom. Oh, no, never, never, most of the pupils were saying: not while there is sun and dancing and lovers in the world; but a few, more emotional, more suggestible or more sentimental, were thinking

how beautiful it was, among such surroundings, to give up all for the love of God. These looked steadfastly at the coffin placed, as the symbol of the cessation of her worldly life, at the foot of the altar steps, where Graciela was to stand.

The trumpets gave out their first solemn strain of music as the members of Graciela's family came in, to occupy the chairs placed for their reception in the chancel. Mantilla-ed, their eyes cast down, the ladies of the de Coria household took their places; the condesa herself, her rich gown of wine-coloured silk glowing from ruby to violet under the light pouring from the clerestory windows; the "Beata" aunts and cousins—thinking, perhaps, too late, of the mistake they had made in not going the whole way, in condemning themselves to their dim martyrdom. The music swelled and trembled in the vaulting, while the men followed them, to take their places in the background, and reflect upon the strange situation in which they found themselves—although such scenes were no curiosity to members of the de Coria family.

And, at last, the young Bride, supported on one side by Don Diego, and on the other by the Bishop, tremendous in his pomp of jewels and gold—she walking, or rather, tottering, as though each step might be her last, with her eyes upon the symbol of her coming death in life.

María Cayetuña could not see Santiago, whose chair was in the shadow of a pillar, but she knew that hers was to be the leading voice in the choir's performance of "*Veni Creator Spiritu*," and she softly cleared her throat. She tried not to allow the solemn, the consecrated atmosphere which was gathering about her like a cloud to overwhelm her, but to concentrate upon her voice, upon the phrase in particular which she had to sing alone. It was not for God or for Graciela that she sang: it was for Santiago de Lorcha, sitting there in the shadows; it was her message to him, her reply to that look that still sent golden fire through her veins.

At a signal from the choir Sister, the girls opened their mouths, and the first soft phrases of the great anthem blended into the dying echo of the trumpets. At first she was very nervous and her voice felt rough with the emotional strain imposed upon it; one or two of the girls, she noticed, were not trying to sing at all, they had collapsed in floods of tears; it left the more responsibility to those who remained. From her raised stall, the Abbess looked at them frowning; she mistrusted these emotional outbursts and their results; she knew that within the next twenty-four hours she would have at least half a dozen proselytes, declaring their resolution to enter the novitiate—and forgetting all about it in a week's time.

They were raising the flowery crown from Graciela's head, unclasping the jewels from her neck and wrists—now was the cutting of the hair; the nun with the spotless white napkin across her outstretched hands was approaching the back of the chair in which the initiate was throned, and the other one taking the implements from the salver held by a novice in the last months of her novitiate.

A strain of such poignant and compelling beauty rang out that the Bishop, startled, turned from his throne to look at the singer. It was María Cayetuña; her hands clasped on her breast, her eyes half closed, her lips parted in an unconscious smile over the liquid notes that issued from them. She was singing, not at all as a chorister might sing, but with the sweet and pagan ecstasy

of a young nightingale. The rest of the choir, conscious of something being wrong, exchanging glances of alarm, missed its entrance and stumbled infelicitously into their next phrase: it was María Cayetuña's triumphant voice that swept them together and carried them on.

When it was finished, she felt almost transported; never had she sung like that, never felt the mastery over that mysterious gift, her voice, that had come to her in singing for her unseen lover. Exhausted by her effort, she sank to her knees, her head swimming, while the vows were spoken; she had to clutch the side of the stall to keep herself from rocking over.

They had reached the Requiem, and the marble floor, the wooden carvings of the stall were heaving about her: they had got to

“Through thy Death and Burial,
Through thine admirable Ascension,
Through the grace of the Holy Ghost the Paraclete”

—when she became sure that something was going to happen to her. By pinching her thigh she managed to retain her consciousness through the long prayers that follow—though unconscious of the figure that had stolen up in the shadow of the arches, and now stood, almost within arm's length, though still concealed, on her left hand.

“That being dead to the world—dead to the world——” Her fingers would not pinch any longer, they felt soft, soft like chewed sugar-cane. Sugar-cane? Where did that come from? A greenish stick, champing jaws, sweetness running over the tongue. . . . The sharpness with which her head hit the marble was not enough to stun her; it in fact restored for a moment her fading consciousness. “That being dead to the world, I may rise in THEE!” That face! . . . and then it was lost in the familiar softness, the waxy incensey smell of the habit which she knew even in her semi-consciousness, and she knew nothing about being borne out of the chapel by two of the Sisters, on the watch for some such incident as this, which took place almost at every mass.

But the round eyes of the choristers turned towards each other, their lips trembled with suppressed sensation. Various reports went round of the affair, for the majority of the pupils were obliged to rely upon the choir for the account of the scene, which, trivial as it had been, reached by nightfall the proportions of a drama. The favoured version was that Santiago de Lorcha had leapt into the choir, under the very nose of the Bishop, and snatched María Cayetuña to his beating heart: whereas the truth was that, although some such idea may have entered his mind as he stepped forth from the shadows of the side-chapel at the precise moment when her head cracked upon the floor, he was forestalled by the watchful nuns, who, accustomed to keeping an eye open for such disasters, had spent the last ten minutes in observing that María Cayetuña got greener and greener, had startled to oscillate on her knees like a blade of grass—and were on the spot before Santiago had time to put his grossly improper project into action.

II

She was the convent heroine. María Anunciata and Guadalupe might gnash their teeth, but there was a notable sifting away of their admirers. Nobody had been very much interested, in any case, in María Anunciata's intended, a middle-aged, pimply Don whose family had fixed the marriage: and Guadalupe's admirers, though numerous, were too apocryphal to rivet the imagination, in comparison with Santiago de Lorcha.

As usual, when mischief was brewing, an uncanny discretion prevailed among the pupils, and the nuns, knowing something mischievous was going on, failed entirely to penetrate to the heart of the mystery. María Anunciata and Guadalupe of course told tales, but their malice was too well known for these to carry weight, even with suspicious authority. Besides, the stories were too fantastic! All they achieved was to rivet a particular attention on María Cayetúña, whose behaviour was demure enough to baffle the Inquisition. She already carried in her bosom four of Santiago's letters, conveyed, as Lucía had foreseen, in the baskets of sweetmeats that reached her from home.

"What a lot of sweets you get these days, Lucía!"

"Well, naturally; with all the parties we had last week there are lots of things to be eaten up." Further comment was stilled by the distribution of candied fruits, of *turrón* in all its varieties, of crystallized rose-leaves—until Lucía was told such baskets would in future be confiscated, on the score both of digestion and of morals.

"We must think of some other way," Lucía told her friend, and reserved the remainder of her store to bribe the negro boy who helped in the garden. The letters now came fast and furious, and María Cayetúña was at a loss to find a hiding-place for them, since the bosom of her gown would no longer serve. It was in search of the cache that she came into that deserted portion of the convent grounds that was called "the wilderness"—the last surviving wreckage of the hurricane of '68, where pieces of fallen masonry were all overgrown with oleander, with the wild arum and all the clotted weeds of that fecund climate.

She found her cache, and she also found something more important. The high wall, levelled during the earthquake that followed the hurricane, had been rebuilt; but beneath the oleander scrub that buttressed its foundations were enough fallen stones to provide a foothold. She found herself, inebriated with her success, high above the wall, with the oleanders breaking in rose-red waves about her waist, looking down into a narrow alley bounded only by the towering and windowless walls of San Ysidro.

Lucía, taken into confidence, was overwhelmed by the romantic possibilities of the place.

"Of course you must tell him at once! and if you're missed, I'll say you're in the privy. But see you don't stay too long at a time—and oh, be careful you don't make your dress dirty. They'll soon notice, if you come back covered with bits of twigs and leaves, as you are now, with streaks on your skirt."

It is not hard to imagine those stolen meetings: so much a feature of

Havanese life that apart from their bearing on the lives of our characters they are not worth recording. Those were days when every wall shadowed an assignation, for the strict embargoes on meetings between the sexes could have but one result—great skill in avoiding the watchfulness of *dueñas* and husbands.

For María Cayetuña, although each meeting with her lover carried her farther away from childhood, it was little more than a crystallization of her dream. She had none of the premature sexuality of her companions, although the potentiality was there, deep-buried in the layers of her romanticism. To touch, to clasp, to hold were not yet part of her essential conception of love—as were the delicate aloofness, the look in a lover's eyes, the deep murmur of his voice, the poetry of his phrases—and creoles were very poetical. These were the honeydew on which she could have subsisted for months, while her imagination soared free of her lover's torments, poised itself in the empyrean of her own complete and utter happiness. A state more exquisite, a purer spirituality of passion, could never be conceived; without realizing that, she sought to prolong it, for, innocent as she was, some instinct told her that, once past this stage, it could never be quite the same again.

So he sat his horse in the lane, while she, poised above him, drew up a great pink fan of oleander behind her head, to form a screen between herself and possible observation from the Santa Clara windows. It was, fortunately, the domestic side of the buildings: the great store rooms, linen presses and the lofts where they did carpentry and dried the clothes were there; if any of the Sisters fell into the sin of idleness, and were tempted to glance from the deep-set windows, all they would see was a broad pink sheaf of oleander, which might appear to be agitated in a curious fashion by a non-existent breeze. And even that might be due to a bird.

But what satisfied María Cayetuña was not sufficient for her admirer. Santiago de Lorcha was in a state of desperation; recognizing to the full his own madness in indulging this hidden passion, he knew himself incapable of conquering it. That little brilliant face, that light, immature body, scorching into his imagination, had driven out every previous passion it had indulged. There were times when it horrified him to contemplate it.

As little shocked as his sister Isabela by the results of interbreeding, and lightly as he would have copulated, had the spirit moved him, with a negress, the quality of his emotion for María Cayetuña warned him, through his brain, his heart and his senses, that this love of his would never fit into that casual category. Although, in common with all the island people of *pur sang*, he despised the half-breed, her mixed blood became a direct challenge to his chivalry.

Although but a stripling at the time of Matthew's visit to Havana, he could clearly remember the tall, arrogant Englishman, and had coveted invitations to the Casa Rodríguez, whose hospitalities were, for a while, a subject of town gossip. This girl was the daughter—according to heretical opinion, the *legitimate* daughter—of a romantic figure of his boyhood. He could even remember leaping on a balcony, with a couple of his school friends, to catch a glimpse of "*la bellísima negra*," whose bedizened beauty, as she drove in her *volante* drawn by its two white mules, made scandalous

legend in the town. And María Cayetuña was the offspring of this flamboyant union that had stirred him, in his boyhood, with its bold romanticism.

But he was no longer a schoolboy, and there were many things to be considered. Not the least among these was the knowledge that Isabela would never forgive him. Such a marriage, she would know, could only be made for love: and this she was likely to forgive even less than the fact that her brother had inflicted an ineradicable blot upon the family escutcheon. He was the only surviving son of Don Pepe's legitimate family, and the continuance of the race was in his loins. Yet, with his knowledge of her, Santiago knew that Isabela was more likely to overlook coloured nephews and nieces than the incontestable proof that her brother's affection had departed from her and was centred in one whom she would never again take across her threshold.

Where would such a marriage stand legally? He suspected that no Catholic priest would consent to perform the ceremony. If, however, he took her in concubinage, Catholic law might turn on him for the seduction of a ward of the convent. He cared as little as his father, Don Pepe, for the Church's animadversions. A leading creole, Don Pepe, as a young man, occupied himself in a casual fashion with politics and religion, and, on account of his standing with the Captains-General, had avoided the more pressing attentions of the Inquisition. He now considered both religion and politics mere youthful twaddle, discouraging his family's occasional interest in them. What attitude would his father take? Santiago wondered—and doubted if he could face dispossession even for the sake of the girl he loved.

Parallel with these anxious considerations ran his meetings with María Cayetuña, only a part of whose discomfort was the inability so much as to touch her hand. Each day when he left her he could feel the ebbing of his resistance, the growth of his resolution to deliver himself to the fatal folly—while the small vixen-face of Asunción Gamborena grew more vulpine with her suspicions and she did not scruple to let her lover see that he was failing in his efforts to please her.

As for Isabela—it was best to avoid her. It was that, or tell her everything: an unthinkable alternative. She would be quite capable of stabbing him with the dagger she wore, like several of the ladies of Havana, as an accessory to her toilette! Yet, but for her jealousy, and perhaps her apprehension of Diego, what an accomplice she would have made—to whom intrigue was the breath of life. How it would have amused her to help him outwit the Abbess, for whom she retained the wayward pupil's dislike for a strict preceptress. She would do it readily enough in the case of Lucía, the docile object of her present schemes—his flouting of whom would add more venom to her rage when all was discovered.

With true creole guile, his mind toyed for a while with the idea of forcing her to become his supporter by threatening to tell Diego about the contraceptive methods that cheated him of his strongly desired child; methods that he, Santiago, had discovered by accident, and which she had not troubled to deny. But it was too dangerous; she might even choose Diego's fury before the prospect of resigning her brother to the arms of María Cayetuña Flood. He must find some other confidante—for it would not be possible to carry out the plan which was shaping itself slowly in his mind without the help of

accomplices. One thing, at least, he never had to doubt: that she would go with him, if he spoke the word, even to the ends of the earth. Beneath her coquetry, that trembled in her speech like the lambent flame of phosphorus, he knew she burned for him, even as he burned for her.

Meanwhile he serenaded his lady—a compliment wasted, so far as the latter was concerned, on the desert air. The dormitories were well in the interior buildings of the old, fortress-like convent, and although other people—the Abbess among them—profited, María Cayetuña knew nothing, at the time, of her lover's musical attentions.

The Abbess on her moonlit balcony listened and beat time with her hand; she loved a ringing tenor.

"Now, which of the pupils is he caterwauling?" crossed her mind, but she felt no uneasiness. The walls of Santa Clara had proved superior in their time to the most dare-devil of suitors.

By the time the pile of stones behind the oleanders had been discovered—and a nice sensation that made; culminating in fearful recriminations of the convent personnel, and the felling of hundred-year-old trees whose blossoms were dust in a few hours amid the withering lance-heads of the leaves—and the great bell of Santa Clara had sent its shuddering warning across the town: while the news sped from end to end of the island, and every person in authority from the Governor to the Holy Officers of the Inquisition was dragged into the search for the escaped girl—María Cayetuña Flood had jumped down into the alley in her white convent gown, was smothered almost before her lover's arms had touched her in a man's riding cloak and bundled through the very door that admitted charcoal and firewood into San Ysidro before any watcher—had there been one—could have believed the evidence of his eyes.

Think of the insolence of it: the fugitive from the Church taking refuge in the Church's supremest stronghold. Think of its danger—for owing to the impossibility of getting out when the convent doors were closed for the night, the escape took place in broad daylight, between class and class, when all the pupils were sunning themselves in the gardens. But the power of the bribe was no less strong in those days than it is in these: the old man who looked after the prison firing was prepared to close his eye with the gold pieces nestling in the palm of a scrofulous hand.

Scared out of her life, but constrained to discretion by her lover's urgency, María Cayetuña, without knowing it, spent four tremulous hours in a windowless cell next to the very one where crouched a subhuman creature who had long ceased to care whether his name were Vilchez or Villars. With nightfall, she and her lover were on board ship for Jamaica, where they were married by the consul, and where they remained for two years.

III

It is hardly necessary to recount the scenes which went on in Santa Clara, in the Palacio Aroche and on the plantation of Buonaventura, where old Don Pepe de Lorcha steadfastly refused to be disturbed by the conduct of his son. He was a very cynical old man, who, from his experience of life on

the island, had contracted much wisdom. He had little, these days, to do with the plantations, whose charge he had deputed to Santiago and to the overseers; and his chief occupations were drink, tobacco and women. He was outrageously proud of his numerous half-breed family, whose interests lay no less near to his heart than those of his legitimate children. He looked down his thick nose at his son-in-law and gave his views on the matter.

"Why worry, why worry? *Madre de dios*, isn't it time the fellow was married?"

"This is no marriage," pronounced Don Diego, yellow with mortification.

The old man chuckled through the fumes of his pipe. The same old to-do! He had enjoyed very pleasant hours at the "Casa de la Negra," as they were calling it now—and they had called *that* marriage legal, for the good of their own ends.

"Then the less need to make trouble about it. Holy Mother of God, has he had no other women? The girl is more worth his while than the Gamborena vixen, or that dancing bitch on whom he's been spending his money for the last twelve months."

"The girl was dedicated to the convent."

"Ay, and her money as well. That's the rub, isn't it? I dare say the cane and tobacco will grow no worse for being manured with English gold." (Tobacco-growing was one of Santiago's recent experiments, on a piece of low-lying, well-sheltered land that marched with the sugar plantations.)

"The Church does not suffer itself to be robbed," was the cold reply. "But on that I have nothing to say. It does not concern me."

Don Pepe's raised shoulders, his heavily lifted and falling arms, inquired, what then did concern him? The condesa, who had insisted on accompanying her husband, rose from her chair with a short laugh. Her rage with her brother had, for many days, driven all power of reasoning from her mind, and all the consolation that she found, in the depths of her bitterness and disappointment, was the knowledge of the blow dealt by Santiago at the conde's pride.

"Diego does not trouble himself about the money, *papa mio*," she said, with an ironical glance at her husband. "He is pained by the fact that the de Coria arms are quartered with those of a family whose principal member, save only yourself, is likely to be excommunicated."

Don Pepe puffed out his lips. All that he wished, in the few more years that remained to him, was to enjoy to the full all the pleasures that unbridled indulgence of the senses could bring him. He was therefore bad material for his son-in-law's moralizing.

"Let them excommunicate him. I take it excommunication will not affect his work on my plantation, and with those damned cattle he insists on raising?"

"No, Papa," was the condesa's dry response, as her husband seemed incapable of replying. She rather enjoyed the knowledge of how offensive to Don Diego, accustomed to wrapping up all his statements in the elaborate verbiage of his class, and congenitally incapable of approaching any subject in a straightforward fashion, was all this plain speaking. "But we gain nothing by shutting our eyes to the fact that the 'marriage' and the excommunication taken together will certainly affect our position in the town. In

Havana his conduct is very badly viewed—it is really very provoking indeed.”

Her eyes filled suddenly with angry tears. The conde had been the first to decree that neither Santiago nor his “wife” should be allowed to cross their threshold, and she could do nothing about that; but the attitude of society to her and her family had been forcibly brought home to her in many places she had visited since the scandal broke out. Her love and partisanship for her brother were both outraged, and, had Santiago been there, she would have overwhelmed him with the bitterest reproaches.

Don Pepe was staring at her with a scornful, date-brown eye.

“Since when, *hija mia*, have you troubled yourself about society? De Lorchas have never concerned themselves with that truck, and Buonaventura has been good enough for me, as it should be for my son and daughter.” Don Pepe was one of the great Cuban planters who did not conduct his affairs from a fashionable house in Havana, his love for the land that had given him his fortune being no less than his detestation for the troublesome formalities of a social existence. “If he is settled on Buonaventura, with wife or mistress—who cares if it’s one or the other?—he will probably pay more attention to business than he’s been doing lately: galloping off to Havana after one or other of his women. It’s a pity,” mumbled the graceless old man, “that for some reason or other he don’t like slaves. Let it alone, do you hear me?” he roused himself to cry with the anger which Isabela respected, because it was her own anger, which spurted always when there was any question of interference with de Lorchas affairs. “Let my son come back—*madre de Dios*, isn’t the place falling into rack and ruin with his absence?—and let the mulatress have him, for husband or lover, as she pleases: what does it matter so long as the boy is content to remain on the land that reared him, and bring up a family to carry on its traditions after he has gone?”

“A family like that?” The skeleton finger of the conde pointed through the open arches of the colonnade overlooking the factory—they were not in the mansion, but down at the factory buildings, where Don Pepe was forced, in Santiago’s absence, to conduct his business—to where a long line of negroes, in single file, marched towards the grinding mill, with the bundles of stripped cane across their shoulders.

The old man gave him a sly glance; he abhorred his son-in-law, and took malicious delight in shocking him.

“They are fine specimens, aren’t they? That fellow—third from the end—he’s mine; and I’d not be surprised if the one following him was of the same vintage. Señor, can you produce any such gratifying proofs of your virility?”

Don Diego, whose childlessness was a raw spot in him, whitened with displeasure. The condesa chimed in:

“It’s very natural, Papa, you should feel tolerant about the problems of miscegenation; but you surely have not considered the possibility of the name of de Lorchas passing on to a line of coloured descendants? Even I, who have quite an affection for some of my coloured relatives”—she smiled as she saw the conde wince—“can hardly welcome the idea of being hailed as aunt by some coon calling himself de Lorchas, and riding in the coach with the de Lorchas arms on the panels!”

"It is not possible; it would not be legal," groaned the conde, cursing his own want of foresight in marrying into such a family.

"Not legal, perhaps, according to Catholic law; but if Santiago is excommunicated, what is to prevent his embracing the heretical faith to which the girl's father belonged, in order to contract a Protestant marriage?"

"It would not be recognized; neither can Protestants hold land on the island. His property would be confiscated," said Don Diego, more cheerfully as this prospect occurred to him. It was a contingency not to be overlooked, since Santiago's religious indifference was one of the conde's chief objections to his brother-in-law.

Isabela's eyes sparkled.

"I can see Santiago raising an army, if necessary, to defend his estates. Buonaventura's in his blood, it is the air he breathes!" That passionate love of the land on which they were born was one of the things she had shared with him; only to think of it strengthened her sense of security, of possession. The land! That would hold Santiago, even if she failed; and with the land to help her, she would soon overcome his madness and dispose of this insolent pretender to his affections.

"If the girl is as handsome as one hears," chuckled Don Pepe, "he will have no difficulty in raising his army. Men have fought for land, but only when it is their own: a beautiful woman sends a man's hand to his sword—if only for the sake of his vanity! Let her come to Buonaventura, bringing my son and her dowry, and we'll not trouble about the colour of the blood in her veins. What's colour? In three—four generations it works itself out; but gold"—the old man winked an eye—"gold propagates, and my great-grandchildren will have reason to be grateful for their grandfather's marriage."

"Have you overlooked the fact, señor," Don Diego said coldly, "that unless the marriage is proved legal in the English courts, the guardians of the girl's fortune will not part with her dowry?"

CHAPTER VI

I

THE creole butler looked up at the gentleman who, accompanied by his negro servant, had just ridden up to the pillared porch of the new, many-windowed ranch-house, and sat there looking about him with an expression of pleasure and admiration that enhanced the charm of his fair, youthful face. He appeared not more than twenty-two or -three, slightly built, with some of the eagerness and tenderness of youth still in his physique, which had not yet hardened into maturity. He looked down at the butler and spoke courteously—not in the overbearing fashion of the creole gentry.

"Is this the house of Don Santiago de Lorcha?" He spoke Spanish well, but with a foreign accent.

"*Si, señor*; this is the Villa María-Cayetuña."

"Bat!" said the young man, and passed the reins into the hands of the negro, who had descended. To the butler he added: "Announce me, if you please, as señor Gabriel Flood."

What entrancing surroundings! As he mounted the steps Gabriel felt he had indeed come to a pleasant place. He noticed, however, and was a little puzzled by, a glance shot by the creole at his negro, and caught a muttered word. Bat stood below, on the carriage sweep, holding the two horses, with a resentful look of one who, expecting a welcome, had received a snub. Perhaps there was ill-feeling here, between white and coloured servants? It was surprising, in any case, to encounter white labour—surprising, and, to Gabriel, reared in the tradition that the black races were raised to wait upon the white, a little shocking. He felt sorry about Bat; had they been arriving at a Barbados house, Bat's welcome would have been no less assured than his own.

Alone in the room into which he was shown, Gabriel looked about him with the same appreciation he had bestowed upon the house's graceful exterior. It was, he supposed, a kind of drawing-room, although lacking the multiplicity of furniture and bric-à-brac which crowded his mother's: of beautiful proportions, with a ceiling painted—evidently recently—with a classical subject, and a large chandelier of carved and gilded wood, curiously light and airy for the material of which it was made. The main interest of the room lay in the floor, which, on a groundwork of white marble, bore a mosaic design, carried out in stones of different colours, as rich in effect as a Turkey carpet. Fascinated, as always, by a new discovery, Gabriel actually knelt on one knee to examine a detail of the design, and in this posture was surprised by Santiago, who entered quickly, and stopped short, to observe with surprise the curious occupation of his visitor.

The younger man leapt upright, laughing without embarrassment, was about to go forward, then, mindful of Spanish formalities, bowed low, immediately afterwards extending his hand towards his host.

"I ask your pardon for an intrusion, señor."

"It is granted," said Santiago, but both puzzlement and incredulity were in his glance. "I think my servant cannot have repeated your name correctly, señor; you are——?"

"I am your wife's cousin: Gabriel Flood."

"From England?" For once Santiago's astonishment got the better of his social behaviour. He did not attempt to conceal his amazement at Gabriel's arrival.

"No, not from so far; from Barbados," smiled Gabriel. "Again I ask your pardon if you were not informed that your wife has relations in the West Indian islands."

"*Hombre!*" cried Santiago, and, thrusting out his hand, which so far had remained in his belt, he shook hands warmly. "What a barbarian you must think me! When you know us better you will understand. . . . But when did you arrive?—and where are you staying?"

"I must confess that the ship only got in this morning; but my baggage has been taken to an inn close to the harbour, where I enjoyed a siesta before coming to seek you out."

"An inn! *Madre mia*, I shall never be forgiven if this leaks out! All must be brought here—orders shall at once be sent—but how did you get here?" Santiago turned on his way to the bell. "By coach? By wagon? I fear you will find transport, all there is, of most primitive on the island. But I assure you," he added, his Cuban pride coming to the fore, "we are not at all primitive in other ways."

"I borrowed a horse; you see I have already experienced Cuban generosity! Although I offered money for the loan, my kind benefactor seemed almost offended at the suggestion. Not only that, but three fellows insisted on running at the horse's side, for at least six miles out of the town, to make sure I did not mistake my way."

"It was no more than they should have done; our tracks are deceiving to the stranger. Once more, a hearty welcome, *amigo mio*; I hardly know how to break the news of your coming to my wife, whose desire to make acquaintance of her English family is so great she will either call me a liar to my face or swoon away with sheer pleasure!"

"At any rate, I am here to prove that you are not a liar," laughed Gabriel, "and as for the swoon—it is a favourite accomplishment among ladies, is it not, and not to be taken seriously, save as an addition to their charms. One thing I must request of you: which is that you will prompt me in my behaviour, for I have been led to believe that Spanish etiquette is the strictest in the world, and I should be sorry to fall short in my cousin's estimation through inattention to the observances."

"*Hombre!*" Santiago clapped him on the shoulder, completely won by this frank address. "You are on a ranch now, not in Havanese society. You like cattle?" His eagerness betrayed Santiago's close addiction to his hobby.

"I should imagine so, but I know little about them; I shall rely on you to remedy my ignorance."

Santiago threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"Wait till you've seen my young bulls! You have not the bullfight in Barbados?"

Gabriel shook his head.

"It is not favoured as a sport by the British," he admitted. "We have bull-baiting——"

"With a dog and a bull? What sort of sport is that?" asked Santiago scornfully. "There is no grace, no elegance in the spectacle of two animals worrying each other. No, you must become a Cuban! Even our ladies handle the bulls; you should see my sister Isabela, she can put most of the professionals to shame. And now I shall see whether my wife is ready to receive us. Who shall I say? A distinguished stranger from the Greenland coast?"

Gabriel had barely time to reflect on what a pleasant fellow this cousin by marriage of his turned out to be before Santiago was back, and conducted him through several cool halls and corridors to a little patio on the shaded side of the house: where there was a fountain, a down-dropping greenness of plants in baskets, and a cradle in which, rocked by its nurse's hand, lay a sleeping child. As they entered it from the arched doorway, a slender, white-gowned figure turned from the cradle over which she was bending and dropped them a curtsey.

"You must pardon me, señor," she murmured, as she extended her hand, palm downwards, like a princess, to Gabriel, "that you find me in the most informal situation; we have few visitors here." She sent a glance of tender reproach at her husband as she spoke, and Gabriel guessed that Santiago had had to use some persuasion before his young wife consented to receive a stranger in a gown that was little more than a muslin wrapper, opening over the starched and beruffled petticoat that stiffened its embroidered folds. Yet how little need she had for apology! All the velvety allure that he had found since childhood in the dark races revived in Gabriel as he looked for the first time upon his cousin María Cayetuña de Lorcha, and reflected on the extraordinary good fortune which, at last, had brought him to Cuba.

Her exotic beauty—an exoticism that seemed to derive from the depths of forests, with their strange, parasitic growths—was heightened and made curious by the smooth, silken hair of a chestnut-brown so dark as nearly to be mahogany, which was dressed in a formal fashion oddly at variance with her casual attire. Its clusters of curls, its swelling mound above her brow looked as though it had just been evolved by the fingers of a society *coiffeur*, and Gabriel reflected that Santiago was right when he said there was nothing primitive about Cuba but its transport. It was a strange touch of sophistication above that delicate and subtle little face, with its sensitive lips and large, liquid, nostalgic-seeming eyes!

As though she felt his too-interested gaze, she snatched up the *velo* of lace which the heat, probably, had caused her to cast aside, and threw it carelessly over her head, as she motioned him to a place at her side.

"You will find a great difference, señor," she observed innocently, "between the climate you have left and ours in Cuba. Indéed"—her naïve glance at the visitor's dress was too much for Santiago's sobriety—"I had always believed that the natives of Greenland clothed themselves in furs all the year round. You, no doubt, have had time to supplement your wardrobe since your arrival in the Indies——"

It was a joke that was to serve them for a long time—but not in María Cayetuña's presence. She did not take kindly to jokes at her own expense.

Guessing as much, Gabriel threw a glance of apology at Santiago before clearing up the situation.

"Your husband, señora, was so much in doubt that you would accept my identity that he resolved to test your credulity by presenting me in a character no less unexpected than my real one. *Prima mia*, I am your very humble and respectful cousin, Gabriel Flood, of Barbados."

II

She had not swooned; but her emotion was so palpable that Gabriel inwardly reproached both himself and Santiago for the shock they had given her. She could ask, say, do nothing practical; it was like an exhausted moth, quivering on a leaf, and then, as though she were the moth and he the candle, he could feel the vertiginous dance of her spirit about him—the charmed advance, the wild swooping away, and ever and anon the return. . . . *Oh, my love, don't let me destroy you!* He heard it, heard the voice of his own soul, disclaiming all those sentiments of affection and sympathy which, as her cousin, he might with decency offer her. . . . He was appalled.

It was Santiago who, ignorant of the emotional vortex that involved the other two, saved the situation.

"*Caramba!* And how does my English cousin"—it was evident he accepted the relationship with pleasure—"come to speak Spanish so well?"

Instantly master of himself, and already wondering if he had been the victim of some preposterous flight of imagination, Gabriel answered:

"As soon as my heart began to be set on visiting Cuba, I applied myself to the language, so that I might not be too much at a loss among the company I hoped to frequent."

"What energy! And do you speak other tongues as well?"

"French is the only other I have mastered," he said modestly, yet not without observing that this, for some reason, gave María Cayetuña satisfaction.

. . . She had seen, with a flash of self-realization as rare as it was unexpected, that up to this very moment she had never quite believed in her heart in those fabulous English relations who formed the foundation of all her romancings; whose figures moved through her dreams like the figures of the old-fashioned, chivalresque stories. She saw, not Gabriel, but the embodiment of her own fantasies: a creature whose beauty was to be taken for granted, his heroic qualities no less so; for he had not come about in the ordinary way of flesh and blood, it was she who had willed him to life, out of her imaginings. She had an impulse to flutter about, to touch him, which was only held in check by ingrained convention. It was La Quimérica—the Dreamer—in resurgence, after the years of sweet, thrilling, earthy metamorphosis, as Santiago de Lorcha's wife.

But even this trance-like state gave way to the tug of more recently acquired responsibilities. Presently she rose, with a curtsy of apology to the guest.

"I must go and give my child her meal," she said simply, and went to the door, which he hastened to open for her.

Bat was on the other side of it, and there was evidently an argument in

progress between him and Santiago's major-domo; but Gabriel's attention was wholly diverted from this by María Cayetuña's action.

She had shrunk back, almost into his arms, and he heard her breath indrawn sharply. He heard a smothered exclamation from Santiago, heard the scrape of his chair and his steps approaching from behind.

"What the devil are you doing?" asked Gabriel sharply.

"Dey say we is stopping, Mars' Gabriel!" stammered Bat, obviously much taken aback by the appearance of the white folk. "An' I wanna know ef yo' wishes me to ride back to Habana to look after de baggage! Seems to me we bettuh not leab all de goods to be tuk care of by dem no-'count fellas we seed in de town!"

"Be off and see to them; make yourself scarce until I send for you," said Gabriel, vexed by a situation whose meaning he was at a loss to imagine. As Bat shuffled off down the hall, María Cayetuña slipped past them and began to run up the stairs; Gabriel saw that she was holding the end of her *velo* across her mouth and nose. What was it? Was Bat sweaty with riding, was it the oil on his hair? Gabriel was so used to both that he realized ashamedly he would not have noticed them. He turned to Santiago.

"I beg your pardon, cousin. Bat is my body-servant; he is accustomed to following me everywhere."

Santiago, smiling, dismissed the matter with a wave of the hand.

"And what, señor, do you think of your cousin?" He led the way back to the table, refilled Gabriel's glass and indicated a chair. The latter still felt embarrassed as he sat down, but in the face of Santiago's friendliness, his light dismissal of an awkward incident, felt it would be boorish to press for an explanation. "Supposing I can't have Bat here?" flashed through his mind. "Good God, what should I do? I doubt if I can as much as tie my own cravat!"—which was not surprising, since John Flood had given Bat, himself only just out of the piccanin stage, to his little brother on his seventh birthday, since when Bat had been Gabriel's nursemaid, watchdog, valet and inseparable shadow. What had Bat done to offend? He was a handsome, well-set-up ducky, well-trained and well-spoken, a nephew of old Jocabed whose daughter had been Gabriel's earliest love.

He pulled himself together, however, to answer Santiago's question.

"I congratulate you with all my heart. Nothing can give me greater joy than the spectacle of her happiness, and yours. I should like to add my personal regrets"—he looked straight at his companion—"for the inconveniences to which you have been put, in respect of your wife's fortune."

Santiago raised his hand with the cigar in it, and flicked the ash on to a plate. His full lips twisted as he replied:

"The procedure of English law has confused, not only me, but those employed on my wife's behalf to guard her interests. It seems that the Courts do not yet think fit to accept the legality of our marriage."

"How damnably mortifying for you!"

"One must have patience." Santiago waved his hand. The endless spaciousness of creole patience was in the gesture.

"You don't know our English courts!"

"Nor you our Spanish ones."

"Of course, I know the attitude of our family has been obstructive from

the beginning; in fact, had it not been for the death of my father, and of my eldest brother, John, I think the arguments over the first marriage—Cousin Matthew's—would have gone on until we were all in our graves."

"Have you no feelings in the affair?" asked Santiago curiously.

"Only the feeling, or impression, if you like, gained from my brother William, that Cousin Matthew would have liked justice to be done."

"You are broad-minded, señor!" Gabriel stifled a smile, knowing that such broad-mindedness was far from reflecting the opinion of his family.

"Does the passing of such a monstrous estate out of your hands mean nothing to you at all?"

"To begin with, the estate is by no means so 'monstrous' as it was, since its depletion by previous lawsuits," said Gabriel frankly. "Secondly, I might feel more keenly about it if I had stood to profit from the original will. It was always taken for granted that my father, who had quarrelled with his family, should not inherit: a matter which troubled us very little; since we had grown up with no expectations from that particular source. I was born and reared in Barbados, where my father's business was, for many years, so successful that there seemed no reason to trouble about the future. Though we are a large family, he left ample provision for us all; my married sisters are provided for by their husbands, and the unmarried ones don't constitute a heavy charge on the estate."

"And are they all as indifferent as yourself to the outcome of the suit?" persisted Santiago, who, as a creole, could not imagine any person of intelligence being indifferent to money.

Gabriel laughed. Had they been so, he would not have been there! But he would not, for the present, raise this point with Santiago.

"My father and my brother John would certainly have resisted my cousin's claim with their last breath—if only on grounds of principle. On Father's deathbed, he solemnly enjoined John, as his heir, to resist to the utmost any further attempts on the part of the Catholics to get Grandfather's estate into their hands. You will excuse me! Father was a bitter opponent of"—Gabriel hesitated, then added with courtesy—"the true faith, as John was after him."

"You are Catholic in sympathies, if not in practice."

"I hold by the right of every person to worship in the manner that suits him best. I'm neither believer nor heretic, if it comes to that; I praise the sun, like the pagan, and find God in all the good things I see about me. It may be an indolent creed," Gabriel admitted, "but I'm afraid I have not the qualities that make a good Catholic or a good heretic. I can't feel militant about those things."

"And your brothers?"

"Oh, Thomas and Henry, who now manage the estate, don't trouble much about religion. If it were only a question of that, we should have reached a settlement by now. It's the American situation. We didn't come badly out of the European wars, but this struggle for American Independence has hit our trade badly. My brother William, by the way, is over there now; he joined Howe's army and got wounded at Chatterton Hill. Henry and Thomas have got the three plantations on their hands—Triton and Halifax, which have always belonged to us, and Foxley, which he acquired only a few years before

his death; and I'm afraid they have dropped a good deal of capital in the last three or four years."

"So they want my wife's to make up their losses."

Gabriel looked honestly at him.

"It's not a question of wanting, Cousin. So far as I understand, the English solicitors, who controlled the estate until María Cayetuña came of age, were instructed that there were certain grounds for opposition, which should be fully investigated before the settlement was agreed."

Santiago laughed ironically.

"You needn't mince your words! The Church, which fought tooth and nail, against its sternest principles, to establish my wife's legitimacy, on finding it stood to gain by it, now fights no less strenuously to discredit her marriage."

"But are you not a Catholic?" asked Gabriel in surprise.

Santiago leaned back in his chair, his handsome eyes narrowing as he looked at his companion.

"When you arrived here to-night, did you notice anything in particular—anything that struck you—about the *hacienda*?"

"Do you mean those great gates? That enormous wall—which, I take it, runs completely round your private estate? Yes; I thought the place looked like a fortress."

"It might be, it might be," agreed Santiago, as though the idea had only just struck him. "Those gates, those walls are the measure of my Catholicism. *Si, señor!* You must inspect the provisions I have made for the safety of my property. My father pretends to jeer at them, but had I the means, not only my domestic quarters, but the whole of Buonaventura and the ranches should be encircled with walls like those."

"What made you undertake so ambitious a scheme?"

"Oh, various things. . . . Two attempts at kidnapping my wife, just after we settled. . . ."

"Kidnapping? But who——?"

Santiago smiled and made a dismissive gesture.

"Do not let that upset your plans, *primo mio!* You see what pleasure your coming is to my wife. She sees but little company——"

Gabriel said, with not quite perfect sincerity—for what sort of welcome would these de Lorchas meet on Triton?—

"You must bring her to visit us. We're a great family, you know!" He laughed, to forestall Santiago's ceremonious acceptance of the invitation. "Four brothers—at least, William, as I told you, is in America; he says as soon as the wars are over he is going to marry an heiress and bring her back to Barbados! There are Thomas and Henry and myself and no less than seven sisters, with their husbands and children; so she would not lack for gay society."

"Your father provided handsomely for the continuance of his name! I wish I could hope for the same." Santiago spoke with an envious and troubled note in his voice. "So far, there is the little girl you have seen—*qué guapa*, no?"

Gabriel hastened to bestow the expected compliment, but he had his doubts: the little creature, though white enough—white, that is to say, as creole babies, who were all glazed with the same greenish-bronze—and already crowned

with a thick fuzz of jet-black hair, had curiously developed features for a baby; the nose was already a nose, instead of a dab of putty, the mouth gave more than a suggestion of its eventual stubborn shape, and premature brows made tufts of darkness above the large, intelligent eyes. Still, for the father's sake, he agreed it was a very handsome baby.

"But it seems my wife is delicate. We should have had another, this September. . . . My father was unfortunate as well—at least, in his legitimate progeny. There were six of us, but the only ones to survive their infancy are my sister Isabela de Coria and myself. I should not like to have Buonaventura pass into other hands. Come, I must show you how beautiful it is."

He rose and, leading the way, drew Gabriel out on a moonlit porch that looked towards the old mansion of Buonaventura, hidden, however, in its thick grove of trees. The moonlight lay like cream on the richly undulating earth, and the moon-silvered crest of the Cordillera de los Organos ran like a streak of jagged lightning across the violet sky. All about them was a hushed whispering, that was like the growing of grass in that fecund air.

"I think it is the most beautiful place I have ever seen."

"This? This is nothing. Five years ago it was only a shack, where I did my ranch business—on which my father thinks I spend more time than I should! Have you never felt like that—that you want to throw the best of your energies into something that matters to nobody but yourself? The English think we creoles are idle; wait till you see the trouble I take over my bulls."

"In your place, I think I should find cattle-raising more interesting than planting," said Gabriel—knowing nothing of either. At home, he took no shame in his indifference to and ignorance of the plantations; here, contrasting his own physical languor with the other's virility, he felt a self-consciousness that only increased his liking and admiration for María Cayetúña's husband.

"I will tell you something: unless there are changes on Buonaventura, it's cattle-raising that will save us in the end. My father's methods are hopelessly out of date, and he will not give me authority to make changes that would bring us into line with our competitors. You grow Otahite, I suppose, in Barbados?"

After a mental convulsion, Gabriel stammered that he thought they had been growing it for about ten years. Santiago gave a short, impatient nod.

"We're still planting criolla. I've done my best to induce my father to import the other, but he only looks at the twelve-month canes and asks what better we want than that! I allow the Canary stuff grows free and fast, but its deterioration is rapid, and the yearly planting is a nuisance."

"You shouldn't need it, in a climate like yours," agreed Gabriel.

"We would not need it, if we could establish modern methods of production in the place of a system that goes back, I should think, to Cristóbal Colón!" shrugged Santiago. "With sixteen shillings export duty to pay on each hundredweight of the refined stuff, we're only saved by our rum trade."

"That's with North America, I suppose."

"Most of the liquor and the molasses goes there; and local traders buy in the crude spirit for sale to the niggers and low-class whites. I've told my father that, at this rate, Buonaventura can run for six years; after that—well, after that I hope to have established my cattle trade with America!" He laughed, clapping his hands on his expanded ribs. "De Lorchas will yet be in demand

in Mexico—where they breed their own cattle, yes; but the best animal that fought in the Easter bullfight at Tampico was a cross between a de Lorcha and one of their native beasts, and I have prospects of good sales in the coming year.”

He rested his arm affectionately on Gabriel's shoulder, and the two of them, partnered by their shadows, went down on the dew-drenched grass.

Santiago had changed during the last five years; he was broader, stouter and of finer muscular development since his life on the ranch and the plantation had absorbed the energy too much of which was formerly dissipated by carousing in Havana. Something, too, of the rakish air of the indiscriminate gallant had left him, and his presence held the sobriety and the dignity of the man of substance and family. Beside his, Gabriel's slight figure looked almost effeminate, although the latter found, to his surprise, that he overtopped Santiago by nearly an inch.

“Look, over there is the forest. We shall ride there one morning; not much of it is cleared, but you can ride into it for a mile or two, and it is of incredible beauty.”

Gabriel's beauty-loving soul thrilled as he gazed over the serene loveliness of the Cuban landscape. What a country for a poet! Among surroundings like these, his timid Muse would surely respond to his wooing? If a thought flashed across his mind of another inspiratrice, he dismissed it hurriedly. He had the sudden, blessed desire to destroy all he had ever written, and to start again, with a soul full-charged with celestial splendour. He knew suddenly that the work he had done at home was thin, puerile—guilty, even, of an occasional tinkling vulgarity it made him cringe to remember. And he had even sent some of it to England, to be printed in a ladies' magazine!

It seemed that the mistress of the house had gone to bed, for the large, pale rooms were silent and empty when they entered. Their gleaming candles, the reflection of their many mirrors gave them an air of preparation for an entertainment that fate had cancelled. Santiago looked about him, as though some such thought was in his mind.

“There is nothing to do at night, so we retire early; besides, I am up with the dawn. No, I am a very estimable character indeed! No more bachelor carousing; that is left to young blades like yourself, free to roam where you will and take your pleasures where you please.” The phrase rang hollow; Gabriel found Santiago looking at him closely, with an expression of doubt and embarrassment in his eyes.

“You are bound to wonder why I do not take you to town and introduce you to society, and why we do not entertain in your honour while you are here.”

“Nothing of the sort,” Gabriel hastened to say. “I am not much for society; my tastes are sedentary, and I find more pleasure in reading and contemplation than in social pursuits.”

Santiago's raised eyebrows suggested that he did not quite know what to make of this; but he felt relieved. It was on the crest of his relief that he blurted out:

“In Havana, María Cayetúña is not regarded as my wife.”

“What?”

“As the Havanese look on her as my mistress, we do not receive the

acknowledgment due to our station. I, naturally, am free to go where I please—save to a few stiff-necked bigots who are afraid to risk their credit by associating with an excommunicated person! I am not, however, permitted to present my wife in society——”

“But you aren’t telling me the Cubans are Puritans?”

“*Hombre!* There are very few who do not go about openly with their mistresses, who are received by all but the most particular. No, it isn’t a question of morality. But my wife’s mother being a negress, there are very few Havanese houses open to her, and those, such as they are, I would not permit her to enter.”

“It is a damnable problem,” Gabriel admitted, after a long pause, “and we are to blame for it; for if we bed with these poor creatures, what right have we to disown the results of our coupling? And no man is ostracized for taking a coloured girl, yet if he tries to legalize his position, the Church, the law and society all look at him askance. It is a very unfair state of things; yet how it can be altered—except by a form of abstinence that does not seem in the way of the average person——? I, for instance, have seen more beautiful negresses, up to the present, than white women——”

“And——?” There was a quizzical lift in Santiago’s eyebrow. Gabriel flushed, and was glad of the candlelight to mitigate his embarrassment.

“I happen to have had nothing to do with a coloured woman. Colour in itself gives me no revulsion; but I can never see a slave, and mark her beauty, without I am so overcome with compassion for her pitiful state that no other sentiment is possible.”

“I also have never had a negress,” said Santiago bluntly. “In my case, probably, because it was taken for granted, as my father’s son, that I should do so! Our slaves are sufficiently well treated; there is no need to regard them with compassion. Nor am I compassionate by nature! It is not a useful quality in running a plantation. Our people get justice and good living; it is more than half of them deserve.”

“To judge from all I saw on my way here, you suffer no shortage of black labour in the island.”

“Don’t believe all you see. How about yourselves?”

“It is one of our chief problems. The supply of slaves is far below the demand, and if we enlarged Triton it is doubtful if we could work it, with the inferior stock that now reaches us from Africa.”

“We are in the same quandary. We could get half-breeds enough to run Buonaventura twice over, but the cattle aren’t worth their keep. It takes five half-breeds to equal one negro on the land—though they’re good enough in the household.”

“We done get yo’ stuff, Mars’ Gabriel!” Bat’s shiny face had come tentatively round the door. “Dey sho’ is a lot! Does yo’ want it all in yo’ chambuh, or does I stow de big pieces in de outhouse?”

“I’m afraid”—Gabriel turned to Santiago—“this makes some sort of nuisance for you. My servant is used to being with me wherever I go; it had not occurred to me that he would be in the way here.” Despite his courtesy, a faint note of reproach crept into Gabriel’s voice; it was, in Barbados, a flagrant breach of the rules of hospitality not to welcome a visitor’s servant.

Santiago threw an arm across his shoulder soothingly.

"*Hombre!* All must be as you wish, of course." He spoke to one of his own servants, who had uneasily followed Bat into the room. "Tell him to place everything for your convenience; but you will not object," he added, when Gabriel had given Bat some curt directions, "to your man's sleeping with the rest of the negroes in their own quarters?"

Wondering what Bat, who had slept across his master's threshold ever since he came to Triton, would think, Gabriel perforce assented.

"You have perhaps noticed"—they were once more alone—"that we have no indoor negroes here?"

"I noticed"—light began to break through—"that your butler, and the baby's nurse, both are creoles."

"A pretty penny it costs me!" said Santiago good-humouredly. "It is my wife's whim not to have a negro across the threshold—although she had to give way in the case of my man Sombra, who is to me what I imagine your negro is to you. If we lived in Havana I could not afford to gratify her! Nor do the creoles work so well as the negroes; they are an upstart lot, these low-class whites." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "You will notice, too, that she nurses the child herself; that is very unusual here, among the upper classes. My sister and I were suckled by a fat old woman who took it bitterly to heart when told she was not to nurse my daughter!"

"It is not, perhaps, a matter for wonder——"

"No, but it is time she forgot her maternal ancestry; it causes awkwardness, and leads, sometimes, to ridiculous situations. Would you believe, she will not visit my father, because—well, to put it plainly, because of a certain eccentricity to which my sister and I are well accustomed! It causes us no embarrassment that the servants who wait on us there share our father's blood; on the contrary, it strengthens the bond between masters and servants, it gives us a share in each other's interests—she will not take that into account," concluded Santiago, on a note of injury.

"I can see it is a very sore position for my cousin," said Gabriel, his heart filling with pity for the poor, beautiful creature, struggling against her destiny. Not wishing, however, to hurt or offend his host, he added: "But she is fortunate in having a husband like you, Cousin Santiago, to understand and humour her sensibilities."

"It is better since the child came. And we are not, of course, wholly without society. Unfortunately, such as it is, it is masculine. My sister Isabela, whose sympathies I have tried to enlist, is obdurate; she has been one of our bitterest opponents from the first. So María Cayetufía has no feminine company of her own class. That will be all right," said Santiago, with cheerful male optimism, "when there are more children. You never saw such devotion as she expends on our María Pía! She is blind, deaf and dumb to all else, when our daughter so much as whimpers in her cradle."

CHAPTER VII

I

"You know, there are times when I so long to walk on Bristol cobbles that I can hardly stop myself from rushing on board some ship that bears the English flag! I want to see the small gardens and the beautiful grave, grey houses, and smell the scent of English roses."

"You speak as though you know them all."

"I have heard my father talking, and I've sent for all the English books I could get hold of, especially those that have pictures in them. I have some of them here with me: I must show them to you one day. Do you know, I think I could find my way anywhere in Bristol, after all I've read and heard? I could take you by the hand and lead you up above the town to the high land which is Brandon Hill: and I could show you grandfather's house . . . Hercules Flood; it is a fine name; and he was your great-grandfather, remember. . . . The house is called Triton Lodge, and we could stand together in a place called the 'Peep' and look down upon the rivers Frome and Avon, and see little ships that look no bigger than toy boats from up there on the hill!

"And I would take you into the house, and there would be many mirrors, and—and shining floors for you to dance on, and beautiful carvings on the walls: birds and fruit and long sprays of flowers that look as though you were in a pale bower."

"Go on—go on," breathed La Quimérica.

"And the portraits of your ancestors and mine hanging on the walls. And in the garden—which you would think very tiny in comparison with these great spaces—the grass grows like velvet round a pond where I could gather you lilies to wear in your hair."

"And everywhere it would be 'Flood, Flood'—people whose names I've known all my life and never seen: people who knew the men and women whose blood runs in our veins: talk about my grandfather and uncles and the part our family played in making Bristol a famous city: churches with tablets that commemorate our forefathers, monuments we have built, inventions for which we are responsible. It would not be like going among strangers; people would turn and hold out their hands at the name of Flood, and it would all be laughter and remembering—we should be like a prince and princess visiting their subjects!" He broke off to laugh, half shyly, half proudly; for usually, when he talked like this, no one made the least effort to understand. His sisters hushed him mockingly, with impatient flicks of their fans, his mother's eyes grew sleepily tolerant as she apologized for her departure with a vague caress. None of them cared, as he did, for England, or felt the weight of the tradition as he had felt it, almost from his cradle. How should they? Jonathan was the only one who had known it, and he had relinquished it of his own free will.

"'Flood is Bristol, and Bristol is Flood': I've heard my father say that."

He was proud of it, although he quarrelled with my grandfather, and always declared that nothing should take him back there again. The others—I mean my brothers and sisters—don't seem to feel it, but I—I've always felt some part of me so tightly curled round that little patch of English earth that I am bound to go there in the end."

"No one ever made it real before," she was whispering.

"Can you imagine it?"

She made a gesture that expressed the complete confusion of her mind.

"I have nothing to help me. It is like drawing a picture of something you have never seen."

He realized how the whole range of her imagination must be bounded by her life in Cuba; it was difficult enough for him, born and bred in the tropics, but with the benefit of his wide reading, to get a picture of the England of his father's bald descriptions. Jonathan had no gift for words; his memories were mainly material. It was from literature that Gabriel had drawn his visionary England.

"Perhaps mine is only a dream; perhaps England isn't gentle, and grey, and full of soft voices, as I imagine it. Soft voices that talk of many things no one has heard of in this part of the world. Men like Mandeville and Lord Shaftesbury and Swift, weaving life into new patterns, opening the eyes of ordinary people to the wonders around them—giving them the desire to live for something more than themselves. . . . Don't let me talk like this; I must be boring you terribly!"

Her small face was drawn, her eyes dilated with the effort to understand, but she shook her head.

"*No lo verré, nunca*," she said softly; it was like the tolling of a little bell. "You know, when I was young, they called me '*La Quimérica*'—*c'est à dire, La Rêveuse*"—they were talking in French, because of the presence of the dueña who sucked sweets and rocked unceasingly, with protuberant, suspicious eyes fixed on Gabriel—"and I believed that if one thought of things hard and long enough, they were bound to come true. I know now it is not so: that this"—she held out hands with a movement of curious, blind beauty towards Gabriel—"is perhaps all I may have. But I want my baby, my María Pía, to have all the rest. I want her to walk on those green lawns and smell the roses and look down on the river and the ships. I want her to feel she is part of all that which I have never known. I want her to look in those mirrors, and see those Others, the ghosts, looking over her shoulder. How can I make it happen?"

"If you talk to her as you are talking to me," smiled Gabriel, "she will make it happen herself: for I never saw such a strong-willed baby in my life, and I don't envy those who have to keep her in order!" As though conscious of being the subject of the discussion, María Pía kicked vigorously in her cradle, and made crowing noises to indicate that she wished to be picked up. The nurse approached at a sign from the mother, and took up the baby, who was indeed growing with an almost terrifying rapidity that rivalled the vegetation of that fecund land, and was already much too heavy for the fragile mother.

And so the bond deepened between these two young creatures, held together by a nostalgia for which neither had a name, and Gabriel sought

always fresh matter to feed the intense and hungry longing he felt in her—a longing which he knew, with a faint sensation of guilt, which yet was mingled with joy, was increased by his presence there.

"Ships; you are mistress of a fleet—do you know that?" He thought the romanticism of the idea might appeal to her, although he had heard Henry say that the Spanish lawyers had requested the realization of all the material assets in gold: all, that is to say, except the jewels, which were to be reserved for the legatee. They knew the value, those astute Spaniards, of English stones and settings. And Triton they could not sell, because it was entailed—entailed on whom? Perhaps on the baby who lay cooing and shaking her bright baubles in the nurse's lap. There was nothing to prohibit the distaff side from inheriting.

"You will be going into Havana?" she asked him suddenly.

"I am hoping to see something of the architecture of which we hear so much, even in Barbados."

"You must go to the church of La Merced!" she told him eagerly. "It is the most splendid one in Havana—and much the most fashionable. You really should hear a mass there—but I don't know: since you are a heretic?"

"My heresy doesn't prevent my hearing a mass," he smiled at her.

"You will see the most beautiful and elegant women in Havana—of whom my sister-in-law is one," she said with a wistfulness that perhaps he imagined. "And please will you do something for me? There is a priest there called Don Emiliano to whom I manage now and again to send a little money. You understand?—to light a candle for my father. It is time I sent some more, but I am afraid there are only a few coins this time. I have to save them out of the housekeeping. Please take them, and tell him there will be more soon."

He promised to see to the matter for her, privately intending to leave a sum that would be sufficient for a long time. She did not tell him to keep it secret from Santiago; perhaps she knew there was no need.

So a day or two later, when Santiago was occupied about the ranch, he rode down to the town; he passed through the bossed doors of the great Franciscan church and made his first acquaintance of the Mexican Churrigueresque baroque, burning and convoluting and flaunting its intricacies behind the severe façade; he walked beneath polychromatic ceilings where the robes of saints and the wings of angels sparkled in iridescence of mosaic; he recognized the Mozarabic influence in arabesques of white and yellow, gold and red, which covered every foot of the walls, and newer Spain in the vast decorated grilles of triforium and clerstory; and, though his taste shrank from it all, he felt in it and through it the fearful and living power of the Catholic church, and understood its influence over the fortunes of his house.

The priest accepted the money formally, without curiosity, and, while the candles were lighted, Gabriel went on his knees and prayed for the first time in his life for a dead man.

II

In the following weeks he learned to enjoy an exquisite companionship in the course of which blossomed an intimacy against which each would surely have been on his guard had it not been for the completeness of their innocence.

Santiago's business took him continually out and about the plantations—expeditions on which, at first, for courtesy's sake, Gabriel accompanied him; but the subjects on which they were in sympathy were soon exhausted, and although their friendship remained unimpaired, each was a little baffled by the other.

So Gabriel took to remaining at home, where he wrote many pretty, semi-classical myths about pagan gods and goddesses who stole from the forests to mingle in the rainbow and work magic upon mortals, and dedicated them all to María Cayetúña, who was enchanted, never having heard such things before. He accompanied her singing with the guitar—an instrument of which he was far from master, and even less so when his perceptions were confused by the golden splendour of her voice. He went with her to the gardens, where she gathered fruit and flowers—and few flowers or fruit were gathered, but there was much lighthearted converse and repose on stone benches amid the humming of bees and the entrancing perfumes of heliotrope and mignonette.

He made her garlands of the small-starred *ilathera*, and showed her how to press leaves and blossoms and paste them into an album—an occupation in the course of which fingers sometimes touched, and it took all of Gabriel's will to control his trembling; but he knew what the result would be if the malicious, ever-watchful Doña Vespasiana chose to carry tales to her employer.

He helped her to stuff oranges with cloves, for pomanders, and to fill muslin bags with the sweet dried leaves of aromatic plants to lay among the linen, and it often pleased and amused him to accompany her about her household tasks, which she performed with the light insouciance of a child playing at doll's house.

"You are sure I do not distract you? There are not other things you ought to be doing?"

"What things could there be?" She smiled at him beneath drowsily lowered lids. Gabriel could not help laughing a little.

"What other things! You should see my sisters—all their beaux complain that Mama drives them so hard it is a wonder any of them have time to get married. And then, when they marry, they find a husband is just as bad. They have all, you know, except Judith, who is single, and Rosa, whose husband is a trader, married planters."

"But what can they find to do? They are ladies, are they not? A lady must look after her wardrobe and her complexion; she has her needle, her paint-brush, her guitar—and, of course, her servants to keep in order; but that does not take so very much time."

"You must remember, Triton and Halifax are great plantations, and the good of a plantation depends to no small degree on its women," said Gabriel

gravely. "It is my brother's work to look after the fields, but the rest lies with my mother and sisters. It is they who teach the women to weave and make clothes, who buy the food and see it is properly cooked, who doctor the slaves when they are ill."

"What! They *go about* among the negroes?" Her nostrils were contracted, it was as though her lips shrivelled.

"But why not, cousin? The negroes belong to us, they are our responsibility; at least," added Gabriel, realizing how different was the outlook here, "that is how we look on it at Triton."

"We do not do those things here," she answered him quickly. "No creole lady would lower herself to such occupations! It is only the *montero* women who work on their husbands' plantations—most of the creole gentlefolk have never even been out into the country, except for the bullfights or the picnics which we have in summer on the large estates."

It was evident that she was puzzled and a little hurt by his indirect criticism, and, filled with compunction, he hastened to change the subject. And indeed he had grown to love the delicate life she led in the ivory box of the Villa, from which were excluded all the coarse and crude elements of the plantation and ranch. How utterly lost she would be, in the factory-like atmosphere of Triton, Halifax and Foxley, among their endless activities, their thrum and throb of a "going" industry! But it was hardly an hour before she was laughing at him across her guitar on which her bosom nestled like a dove on its nest, and trying, without much success—for his ear was poor—to teach him one of the *coplas* that, from time to time, found their way to Cuba from the Peninsular. At such moments his blood drummed and he longed for the impudent charm of William who would have known how, without offence, to turn such a moment to advantage.

But quite suddenly, in the midst of her frivolities, she would turn serious, and such a moment came when they bent together over the baby's cradle.

"Put your hand here, under the hood."

As he curved his fingers under the wooden arch they encountered an excrescence which, presently, his touch identified as a crucifix.

"Santiago would not let me put one over the cradle, so Rosario nailed it inside. You know she is not baptised?" Gabriel had not known it. "To you as a heretic it doesn't matter, but——" A wave of longing seemed to pass from her on the sigh.

"Won't Santiago allow it?"

"I haven't seen a priest or made my confession since we were married. I don't mind for myself, but for my baby it's different. The Church looked after me; I want its protection for her in case I should not always be here to look after her."

"But surely—Santiago would refuse you nothing?"

"He refuses me only this," she answered sorrowfully. "He will have nothing to do with the Church because it has made us so much trouble since we were married. I understand what he feels . . . *ay-di-mi*! If only you were a Catholic!"

"If it would help you I might become one," he said slowly.

She smiled, shook her head slightly and folded her hands.

"Cousin Gabriel, you do not know how Santiago thinks or how difficult

it is to make him change his mind after it is made up. I am afraid—if I am not here—that he will send her to his sister's." She bit her lips to control them, but he saw her nostrils dilate and the line of white that appeared round her mouth. "You have not met my sister-in-law? She never comes here although she sometimes visits Buonaventura. She hates me because she meant Santiago to marry her sister-in-law, Lucía de Coria, who is now the marquesa de Montalba, and she would like to take María Pía from me as a punishment for thwarting her plans. Once, when she was visiting my father-in-law, they sent over for the baby to be taken and shown to her. . . . I held her in my arms all the rest of that day and night. I would never let her go to that woman, who is cruel—*dios mio*, if you knew how cruel!"

"But how do you know these things, dear cousin, if you have not met her?"

"I have met her. Perhaps I may tell you about it one day—not now. . . . We had better go on talking in Spanish, *cette femme* is beginning to be suspicious. She knows the de Corias and visits the palace."

He pondered while they played cards to placate the petulant old woman who did not conceal her annoyance at being shut out of the conversation for so long, upon this secret sadness which had lain, unsuspected, beneath the surface of her gaiety. With a lover's selfishness he was even a little glad of it since it seemed to furnish him with another approach to her whom his soul had accepted as mistress of his life.

III

They were riding through the plantations. Santiago ahead of them, his head overseer, a tall, pock-marked fellow with a mouth like a rat-trap, at his side. Under the afternoon sun the slaves were setting the slips for the new crop: a back-breaking task, as each slip had to be set eighteen inches deep and at six feet distance from its neighbours. It was bend, rise, bend, carry—all along the rows, and the crack of the stockwhip used by the negro overseers rang like pistol shots from time to time across the placid scene.

María Cayetuña and Gabriel rode together—the cock's plumage in her triangular riding hat brushing the sleek curls it shadowed, and her figure in the short-waisted riding-coat swayed pliant and slender as a young cane-shoot to the movement of her horse.

They rode across a field that had been harvested to the little village of factory buildings, ringed by the palm-roofed bohios, from which a few old women came out to greet them. Just before they reached the huts Santiago wheeled his horse and came riding back to them.

"*Esposa mia*, is it your will to accompany us farther or shall I send López to escort you back to the house?"

"Oh, for once I shall come." She gave him her sweet, drowsy smile. "If you will promise not to detain us for hours in your sheds and boiling houses." She lightly touched her horse with the whip and cantered forward a few yards in token of her goodwill."

"But for your presence, cousin, we should not have had this honour!" Gabriel wondered whether the words were intended to convey displeasure; he looked quickly at his host, but Santiago was smiling, and bent his head

in a salute that seemed partly ironic. "María Cayetuña seldom patronizes our working quarters, it is a pity, for the slaves—particularly the old people—adore her." He pointed with his crop to where the old negro women were clapping their hands, grinning and curtsying with delight at a vision seldom vouchsafed them. A few piccanins ran out from behind the huts and started a shuffling breakdown—presumably of celebration—but the figure which evoked them rode on without checking her horse; so far as the two men saw she made no acknowledgment of the naïve salutations.

There were the sheds that sheltered the high-wheeled carts and the long-horned oxen which drew them, and there was the heart of the factory itself—the grinding mill, with its conical roof and its primitive rollers for bruising the cane, kept in perpetual motion by somnambulistic mules who traced their endless circle at the end of the poles that moved the upright wooden cylinders. Gabriel had seen it all before, and wondered what Henry or Thomas would have thought of this trumpy machinery, of the old-fashioned furnaces that swallowed fuel much out of proportion to the content of the pans.

And round about this nexus of Buonaventura's industry were heaped the factory buildings in an unbelievable state of brokendownness and squalor—storage sheds, with rotted bags of grain and horse fodder scattering their contents half over the floors, trampled into the filth and exuding the unhealthy, musty smell of degenerated vegetable matter; roofless cabins, with odds and ends of rusted machinery flung haphazard in among offal, piles of cane too miserable to be worth crushing, left to rot wherever negro indolence abandoned it; sheds left empty save for an old, old stench of human excretion and lice.

The bohios themselves were indescribable, and the women and children who moved listlessly among them clothed with an almost indecent squalor. As for the men—Gabriel could imagine Henry pinching his lips and Thomas scowling as they looked at them: for there was never a more pitiable crowd. Many were diseased, the majority had the sore feet which, on Triton and Halifax, were considered legitimate pass to hospital; here the sufferers went hobbling about, and Gabriel saw to his horror that few were supplied with the field labourer's ordinary perquisite of shoe-leather. All seemed to be tormented with the itch, and their skins and filthy garments gave off the faint, pervasive smell of unhealthiness—an impression borne out by their half-closed, lack-lustre eyes.

The full horror of a womanless plantation was borne in on Gabriel, and his mind paid an involuntary tribute to his mother and sisters as he realized what their care and industry meant to the Flood plantations; how their sensible, astringent personalities contributed not only to physical but to moral health among the negroes. Field hands, he knew, had seldom the decency and propriety of household slaves, but respect for white people kept them in some sort of order, at least in their master's presence. Here a sly sort of licentiousness, a veiled lewdness between the men and women extended, he suspected, to the white people who visited them.

On his first visit Gabriel had been ashamed on Santiago's account; what could the latter be feeling at this exposal before a foreigner and his wife's kinsman? Then he remembered that it was by Santiago's insistence that he

was there and he realized in a flash the horrific truth—that Santiago was not ashamed, because these were the ordinary conditions of a Cuban plantation: only a little aggravated by the poverty of the owners.

It was nearly the end of the boiling season; seven of the ten furnaces were cold, two were flickering to extinction, and only one was at full blast, and the cauldron filled with the residue of the syrup that had clarified in previous boilings.

Santiago was arguing the necessity for rebuilding three of the furnaces in readiness for the next season's boiling, while María Cayetúña stood languidly in the doorway between the boiling-house and the cooling-chamber, waiting for her husband to finish his argument. The translucent amber of her skin, the dark pigmentation of the flesh around eyes that reminded him of Turkish hours of whom he had read, and the dark bloom of her lips, enchanted Gabriel through his love for beauty. Something warned him, however, not to betray his admiration too openly, as discretion bade him remain standing half-way between her and Santiago, ready to respond, however inadequately, to the latter's occasional appeals—it was incredible to Santiago that any one who lived on a sugar plantation should not take an intelligent interest in its processes—or to go to the former if she should give him the sign.

The houses, as usual, were restless with the shambling come-and-go of the slaves, and at last, thinking she might be inconvenienced, Gabriel moved to her side.

She had her handkerchief to her lips, and all the warm amber-tone seemed to have drained itself out of her skin, which was almost livid. He looked at her with concern.

"Are you ill, cousin?"

"This stench," she gasped.

"Of the muscovado? I am used to it and find it not unpleasant, but if it offends you, dear cousin, let us move out into the air. I am sure Santiago will not mind our leaving him to finish the rest of his business." He had seen and sensed enough, however, to wonder if creole jealousy would lightly accept the disappearance, if only for a few minutes, of his guest and his wife. Still—she looked terrible, as though she might be going to swoon!

"The sugar? I mean these cattle!"

What happened afterwards Gabriel was to look upon for the rest of his short life as a nightmare. Even as he lay dying in the stupendous Cuban dawn, the memory of that moment was to come back to him, he was to struggle against it, it was to increase his cup of suffering and add to his sadness of farewell the doubt of his own sanity. Not that he ever doubted—we may credit him with this—that the whole thing was unpremeditated, an accident with a hideous ending. It was her reception of it that haunted him, that went like darkness through his love for her, then thence to the very end.

As she spoke she swung away from him, and the unexpectedness of her movement knocked her against a slave who was shambling past. Quickly—quicker than thought, so quickly that it was like a reflex—she raised her hand with the riding-switch in it and cut the negro across the face.

Taken by surprise, the man went reeling clumsily back, missed his footing, spun in the effort to save himself, and crashed face downwards into the vat of boiling syrup.

He need hardly have done it; had he not been a negro, with a negro's instinct for clowning and a negro's exuberance of movement, he would not have done it. The sting of the switch had blinded him a little, but he had taken many worse blows. He might even have stood still; but he did not, and the splashes of molten syrup flew everywhere and brought howls from his unlucky companions and a resonant burst of obscenity from Santiago, who, clutching at López, leapt back in time to escape the searing shower.

With the wretched creature's dying screams ringing in his ears, and amid the hurly-burly that followed, Gabriel seized María Cayetuña in his arms and swept her out of doors. She was gasping, sobbing for breath, with froth forming at the corners of her lips, and nothing visible but the gleaming whites of her eyeballs. He laid her down in the shade, mad with alarm, and snatching the cloth from his neck steeped it in a water butt to lay across her brow.

The ruined negro was carried past them to the factory hospital, his howls growing fainter and fainter. Presently Santiago came out, as cool as though he had just been witnessing a boxing match.

As though she could feel him through her darkness, María Cayetuña leapt up, flinging Gabriel aside, to fasten herself on him like a tigress, glaring up at him with wide, blind eyes, wanting—what? Reassurance? Hardly that; for her attitude, even to the half-stunned Gabriel, was that of the Roman empress who, after some act of atrocity, clings to her lover in search of approbation.

It was a moment as shocking to the beholder as a naked meeting of lovers, and evidently Santiago felt it, for, gently loosening her fingers, he spoke to her in a low, soothing voice.

"*Qué quieres, niña? Callate; no estamos solo.* And next time you want to boil one of my slaves," he added, with a laugh of apology towards Gabriel, "do me the favour not to choose a trained hand, for whom I have just paid forty guineas!"

CHAPTER VIII

I

"At last I have a real entertainment for you!" Santiago announced in tones of satisfaction. It was not until later that Gabriel came to realize how much his creole sense of dignified hospitality must have suffered in being unable to make the fine display that Cubans use when dispensing hospitality. "My sister is bringing some friends to lunch at Buonaventura, and insists we shall amuse them by fighting bulls! Ah, you shall see something, *primo mio*—although it is a little late in the season for bulls. But you will see! My sister on horseback with the *banderillas* in her hands is as pretty a sight as any you have in Barbados."

"If you wish it, I will not go," Gabriel said later to María Cayetúña, who had stiffened and turned her head away during her husband's announcement.

"No, go by all means." He felt reproved by her quiet dignity. "You will find my sister-in-law very handsome. And I think you may see Lucía de Coria—she is now Lucía Montalba—who was my best friend at Santa Clara. Pray find an opportunity of telling her that I still love her, and ask her to give you some news of the Reverend Mother, if she has any."

He bowed gravely. She looked at him for a moment, sidelong, then sighed.

"Go. You will meet Isabela, to whom Santiago longs to present you; and you will probably find her much more to your taste than I."

"Why should you say such a thing?" he reproached her.

"Do you think I don't know you are angry with me? Ever since that affair at Buonaventura."

He flinched as though she had struck him.

"For God's sake! Don't you know I am trying to forget?"

She hung her head.

"Why should it be such a great thing to forget? Very well, very well. Go to Isabela; she will make you forget—everything!" She gave a hopeless little laugh.

"Nothing, and no one," he said, with a desperate earnestness, "could make me forget you." It was, God help him, the truth. It was more than ever the truth, since his thoughts of her had become all bloodshot and poisoned with the memory of the scene in the boiling-shed. It still kept him awake at night, and, in his short restless sleep, he still dreamed of it; and then, when he came face to face with her, saw her delicate, madonna look, as she stooped over her baby, it seemed like a nightmare. It scared him, like some evil, some canker, in an exquisite bloom; he could not believe, yet could not forget, that it was there, and it brought an element of horror into his love for her—a love which, by now, he knew it was useless to deny.

He would have given up the expedition to Buonaventura if it had not been that to do so would surely have been to offend Santiago; beside, he had some curiosity to see this sport of the bullfight, of which, since his arrival in Cuba, he had heard so much.

So he followed her round the garden, of which patches were cultivated and other parts left rough and wild, as though someone's interest had fallen short in the planning: carrying her basket and clipping the blossoms she pointed out to him with gentle imperiousness. And their progress ended, as all such were apt to end, at the baby's cradle; María Cayetúña bent and, with an effort, hoisted her heavy child into her arms.

"Is she not beautiful this morning?"

"She is very strong; doesn't she hurt you when she kicks like that?"

"No, not at all. Look at her, Gabriel: she is not very dark?" She had lowered her voice, he felt the entreaty behind the words. It was with truth as well as with relief that he was enabled to reply:

"But she is not dark at all." He used the word she had chosen instead of the one that was in both their minds. "She is going to have just Santiago's colouring, which is very fine and will look splendid on a girl. In fact, it is a wonder she is not darker, for cousin Matthew had the brownest skin I ever remember seeing on an Englishman: not his face only, but the whole of his body—much browner than some of these Cubans."

"And his father and mother—they were English, were they not?" she pursued.

"Yes, indeed. I have heard, moreover, that my grandmother—cousin Matthew's mother—was blonde; so you see the colouring of the parents is not bound to affect the children." He checked himself, wondering if he had said too much.

"You—then that is why you are so blonde!" she said wonderingly. "You are like your grandmother. Are the rest of your family as fair as you?"

"No, I am the only really fair one; it annoys my sisters, who say golden hair is wasted on a man!"

"So the baby may have my father's colouring." She pressed her bosom towards the child with an access of tenderness; she bent her head; for a moment he thought she was weeping. He heard her whisper: "What—what should I have done if it had gone the other way?"

"It would have been your child; you could have loved it no less," he told her gently.

She flung back her head to look at him wide-eyed. Whatever she had intended to say, it was interrupted by a puff of wind that snatched the folded handkerchief off the nurse's shoulders and sent her chasing it across the patio.

"Cousin Gabriel! Would you know—to look at me—what I was?"

He had been expecting the question and the answer came quickly.

"Never in this world!" It was true; but for the faint lilac tinge at the base of her nails, a thing he had only latterly noticed, she might pass with any one for one of the Cuban Spanish. "How could any one imagine such a thing, with your brown hair?"

For the second time, at the mention of her hair, he saw her covered with confusion, and the incredible meaning of it flashed into his mind. What a fool he had been—what a clumsy, unforgivable fool! And from that moment his tenderness was increased by his knowledge of her secret, which he guessed she had kept from every one else in the world. Did Santiago know of it? He would have liked to believe he did not; but common sense

precluded the possibilities of a husband's remaining ignorant of so intimate a detail of his wife's toilette. She could not sleep in the wig—so exquisitely smooth and unruffled, so fashionably arranged! The thought of that little head, naked, defenceless, frail as a shell, laid on Santiago's shoulder, nearly drove Gabriel insane with the desire to protect it and to displace the one whose duty it was to do so.

The old mansion at Buenaventura, which, with Don Pepe's numerous progeny swarming over it, was maintained, in spite of its architectural beauty, very much like a negro cabin, rang with the voices of an elegant company, whose horses took their ease, after the long ride from Havana, in a tree-shadowed paddock below the porch. Beneath its vast colonnades the company was already disposed, drinking its wine and admiring the matchless panorama that was one of the splendours of Buenaventura, its farthest boundary the Cordillera de los Organos, whose outline was that of the jawbone of some prehistoric animal, its broken fangs culminating in the tusk of Guajaibon.

Santiago cast a quick glance at the familiar scene before turning to the entertainment of his father's guests; he loved it, loved its savagery, loved the sensation of possessiveness it roused in his heart. Those mountains were part of his life: he was born in their shadow, they had made security about his cradle, as a little boy they had enshrined his dreams, his vague, unformulated boyish aspirations, as a youth he had shot buzzards on their rocky slopes. He felt as though he owned them—and ownership was very precious to Santiago.

"Late, as always, Santiago!" a female voice was crying. "But you are forgiven this time, for the sake of the company you bring with you!"

Gabriel, who, during the quiet weeks at the hacienda, had grown out of the way of society, was a little abashed by the battery of dark, shining eyes that was levelled on him. He failed completely to disguise his embarrassment as one of the ladies rose, with an air of being in command of the party, and came forward to receive newcomers.

Dazzlingly handsome in her late twenties, still insolently sure of that beauty which absolved her from all criticism, of which, had it been anybody but Isabela de Coria, there might have been plenty—the condesa was wearing the soft leather riding-breeches, the flaring thigh-boots of a man. True, she had only just changed into them, she had sufficient respect for the conde's prejudices to ride out from Havana in the discreet habit of her sex. The breeches were cream-coloured, the boots of scarlet Cordoban leather, spurred and tasselled with silver. Round her waist was swathed a sheath of bright magenta silk, and over this fitted like a glove the immaculate Andalusian riding-coat, ending a couple of inches above the lower edge of the belt, and springing back from the beauty's bosom in stiffened revers of violet-coloured poplin. The lovely, arrogant chin—now a little full for perfect beauty—was lifted on a man's cravat of starched muslin, and crossed by the silken ribbon of her *sombrero*, which ended in a bunch of multicoloured loops against the raven curls clustered beneath the brim.

"My sister, the condesa de Coria Aroche. This, Isabela, is my cousin, señor Gabriel Fludd!"

"She is María Cayetúña's enemy," Gabriel was thinking, as their eyes met.

"In this attire, señor, it is not possible to give the customary salutation of my sex!" She sketched so boldly the travesty of a masculine bow that the company applauded.

"*Brava, Isabela! Muy hombre!*"

She grimaced, gave him another sweeping glance, and turned casually away; in this attire, it was evident that she felt exempt from the obligations of ladyship. Old Don Pepe was seated sleepily in the shade, a little apart from the guests.

"What's this pretty toy Santiago has been hiding?"

Don Pepe chuckled and looked up at his daughter with sly appreciation of her cunning.

"It didn't take you long to move when news of our visitor reached you in Havana! And what do you think, now you have seen him?"

"That the Havanese are fools if they don't sink their prejudice for once." She was watching Gabriel and the girl to whom he was talking under her lowered brows. "God knows, there are not so many interesting people in Havana that the indiscretions of a man's family need be thrown in his face in a case like this! I shall come again, Papa," she said bluntly. She and Don Pepe were always shamelessly open with one another about their extramarital dalliances. It was, she had discovered, one of the amusing things about being married; Don Pepe, who had been relentless in the preservation of the virginity of an unmarried daughter, most engagingly took it for granted from the moment of her marriage that she was as much of a roué as himself.

To his pleasure, Gabriel found himself seated for lunch beside the little marquesa de Montalba. It was nobody's doing—in fact, he gained the impression that Santiago had intended to place him elsewhere, and was not too satisfied with the present arrangement. The company was large and youthful, all of them sons or daughters of rich plantation owners; the ladies were married, for it would have been considered monstrously incorrect for any young, unmarried woman to attend a gathering which was mainly masculine, and which took place in a house like Buonaventura, whose proprietor was notable for his cheerful disregard of the proprieties.

Little Lucía Montalba had been married three years and was, she proudly told Gabriel, already the mother of three infants.

"Wasn't it luck to have twins? A boy and a girl. That makes two boys, and my husband's family is very pleased with me," she said naively.

He found an opportunity to give her María Cayetuña's message, and his heart warmed to the expression of delight and affection in her eyes.

"Tell her how often I long to see her! I should, you know, only Isabela would be sure to hear of it—she has that horrid old Doña Vespasiana de Lara as her companion, doesn't she? I know, because Doña Vespasiana's cousin visits one of my aunts, and she says all her family are furious with her for accepting the position." Gabriel caught a glimpse of how closely island domestic politics were bound together. "I tell them she is very lucky to be with any one so sweet and charming as María Cayetuña. Yes, tell María Cayetuña I always stand up for her, but I really can't do anything because it is so necessary for us to keep on the right side of Isabela."

"I know she will understand, and it will make her happy to know you are still her friend."

When the meal was over—served with beaming slatternliness by Don Pepe's host of domestics, whose clumsiness Isabela never ceased to criticize, but always jokingly, and with many sly jests at Don Pepe, who took all she said in excellent part—the ladies rose and prepared to retire to the bedchambers, where they would rest and remake their toilettes before riding out to the corrals. The condesa, however, had other ideas.

"When I get a day of freedom at Buonaventura I don't want to waste any of it in lying down!" She had lit one of the small cigars which it had become the fashion for ladies to smoke.

"Bring your guest to the billiard room and Papa and I will score for you."

Her manner of friendliness towards her brother was only a thin glaze over the endless grudge she bore him, and Santiago, aware of it as always, chose not to accept the overture.

"I regret to disoblige you, sister, but there are a hundred things I must see to before we begin our entertainment."

They eyed each other a little ironically; he knowing that she would never forgive him for not marrying Lucía de Coria, and she that he would never forgive her for not receiving María Cayetuña under her own roof; and each helpless and vexed in their souls by their love for each other that weakened their resentment.

"There is nothing, however, to prevent my cousin's enjoying your society."

"If there were, I should not admit it," she told him. "And now, señor? Will you accept me as your opponent?"

"Isabela plays a better game of billiards than I do," answered Santiago, to Gabriel's surprised look. He knew she had been perfectly aware that he would not be able to spend the afternoon at billiards when they were going to fight bulls, and knew this was her ruse to get Gabriel away from the other women. He smiled a little to think how well he knew her. "I assure you, Cousin Gabriel, you will have to be on your mettle, unless you want the humiliation of being beaten by a woman!"

That speech might have two meanings, Gabriel thought, as he accompanied the condesa and her father to the billiard room. It was impossible, he thought, for her to feel friendly towards him on account of his relationship to María Cayetuña.

"Now, señor! If I lose, I will pay you in whatever coin you name; and if I win, you shall pay me in a visit to the Palacio Aroche. My brother seems to be an indifferent host, as he has taken no trouble to introduce you to society since your arrival in Havana!"

He soon discovered that she was a magnificent player: far superior to Santiago, whose loss of temper when he thought himself to be losing often sacrificed the game to a weaker player.

With her full breasts and tiny waist, the condesa Isabela was a fine woman; very much to the taste of his brother William, could the latter have seen her. She was, he thought, the antithesis of María Cayetuña: all artifice where the other was natural grace, all steel where María Cayetuña was tenderness. Yet he would have been something less than a man had he been wholly indifferent to the display of her figure as she leaned across the table to make a stroke, with the cigar clamped between her shining teeth. A curious, un-

feminine habit, and one he could not imagine his cousin affecting: yet in some way it went with the flamboyant type for which she stood.

She ran him neck to neck until they stood equal; her next break was so brilliant that Gabriel knew himself beaten.

"Never mind, señor; you should not find the penalty a hard one," she reminded him, glancing across her shoulder at Don Pepe, who now sat snoring on the settle. She drew Gabriel's attention to the fact with a nod, as she added: "What day do you appoint for payment of your forfeit?"

He knew himself in a quandary. How could he accept the condesa's invitation to a house that closed its doors on María Cayetúña? Her bright glance went through him, and seemed to pluck his secrets out by the roots.

"Come," she said, with an expression of frankness that made him wonder if he was misjudging her. "I know what you are thinking. Do you, then, take the relationship so seriously?"

Trying not to show offence at her impertinence, he replied:

"Apart from question of relationship, señora, I have duties as a guest——" The words sounded pompous, he coloured a little, which enchanted Isabela.

"Allow me to compliment you on your sense of propriety. But, I assure you, your cousin understands the position perfectly, and I am sure it would not cause any offence, either to her or to my brother, if you were to pay me and my husband a visit."

"You are very gracious," said Gabriel, forgetting the ceremonious third-person address which he had been told was obligatory on a gentleman's first presentation to a lady of his own class. "If you will allow me first to make sure that that is so, I should be very gratified to accept your invitation."

"It is not an invitation," pointed out the condesa. "Do you not think it important to pay your gaming debts, Señor Flood? I would pay mine, whatever they entailed, with the most conscientious promptitude."

He felt, as she had intended him to feel, that he had missed an opportunity.

"I promise you shall find me no less prompt, when I have made sure that by doing so I give no offence to those to whom I owe a vast debt of hospitality."

"I see you have a will of your own! Well, so have we." She laughed shortly. "You must not think I am one of those fools in Havana who——" She pretended to falter, then gave him a glance of charming candour as she continued: "You have seen this household! It would ill become Santiago or me to take up attitudes of superiority to what, after all, is a common state of affairs in this part of the world. But, as you know, miscegenous marriage is forbidden to Catholics, and the conde is a great supporter of Catholic rule. As his wife, I am obliged to follow suit—at least in society. Up here I do very much as I like, and I vow I am much attracted to my pretty sister-in-law, whose relationship I am obliged in public to disclaim. But with all the whispering that goes on round here, it is more than my credit is worth to go to my brother's house, and since his wife will not visit me here, what chance have I for cultivating her society? Perhaps you can persuade her, while you are here, to do something about that!"

Ingenuous as he was in many ways, Gabriel found it impossible to accept

this at face value, since it ran all contrary to the little Santiago and the much María Cayetúña had told him.

"And so it is true that everybody in your family has accepted your cousin's legitimacy, and her right to claim her father's fortune? I find that astonishing."

"There is no question of her legitimacy," said Gabriel coldly. "Her father was an English Protestant, and the marriage took place on British territory, before an English Protestant priest. She is an English subject—at least, she was an English subject, until she married your brother. As an English subject she won her case against my grandfather's family——"

"Which has not, so far, accepted her marriage," pointed out the condesa.

"Owing, largely, to obstructiveness inspired, if not actually put into practice, by certain interested parties here in Cuba," said Gabriel bluntly.

The condesa raised her fine eyebrows and laughed.

"I hope you do not think I am among the interested parties, señor?"

He bowed, making no reply. She became suddenly serious.

"But surely you can see, señor Flood, how much it would be to my own interests to support the marriage? You know that I continue to derive emoluments from my father's plantation—which was arranged in my marriage settlement. If my sister-in-law's fortune were at my brother's disposal, for the improvements he wishes to make at Buonaventura, we should all benefit—is that not so?"

"It is so that it had struck me," admitted Gabriel.

"Then——?" she queried.

"As your sympathies are with my cousin and her husband to that extent," said Gabriel, a little shyly, "I wonder that you have not given expression to them, with others, as well as with me."

"I do not understand you," said she, with a touch of hauteur.

He thought rapidly, wondered whether he dared bank on her sincerity, yet felt that, for María Cayetúña's sake, there was no harm in risking a moderate appeal.

"My cousin is very lonely out here, señora——" He hesitated.

"I have told you I can do nothing about that."

"I understand; but, as a Catholic, you will understand, even better than I, the pain it gives her to be cut off from her Catholic observances."

"A point she might have considered before running away with my brother!" said Isabela sharply.

"I gather, all the same," stammered Gabriel, trying to make his meaning clear through a vocabulary with which he was unfamiliar, "that the Church is prepared to allow her its benefits: but that she is forbidden by her husband to accept them. She is very anxious, for instance, to have her baby baptised——"

"Naturally, that should be done," nodded the condesa.

"If you could use your influence with your brother to procure this concession, it would be very gratefully received by the señora de Lorcha!"

She looked at him closely. What a fascinating creature, this young Englishman who had the insolence, or the temerity, to claim legitimacy for a half-breed cousin! Those bright-blue eyes, the almost childishly tender cheeks with their golden down! They roused in her emotions that had lain

dormant for several years. In all the period of her marriage she had ventured to take but one lover, and that was a brief, anxious idyll of which neither had ventured to take full advantage. There were too many spies, the outgoings and incomings of the de Coria family too conspicuous to encourage indiscretion.

But here, up at Buonaventura——?

She sighed, allowed him to see that he had asked a difficult favour, but made a movement that was half capitulation.

"We will talk of this again, señor." Not at the Palacio Aroche; as well to keep this newcomer as long as possible from Diego's suspicious eyes "But now I must prepare to show you our skill with the bulls!"

He wondered if he had committed an indiscretion, as she left him, flashing a glance that promised—what?—from her bold, deceptive eyes. As an enemy she could doubtless be formidable; yet, on her own showing, she bore no personal enmity to María Cayetúña. He was uneasy, all the same, as he joined the group of young men who were preparing to ride out to the bullring.

II

Santiago's bullring was the pride of his life. Many of the estates had private rings, where the favourite sport of the island was carried on for the benefit of the gentry, but these were, for the most part, little but circles of rough ground surrounded by a rough barricade of hewn logs, and had no pretence either to elegance or surface conditioning. Santiago had squandered money on his ring, which, flat as a tennis court, had actually a sand surface, and was, in fact, a perfect replica in miniature of the classic Sevillian ring, about which he had taken pains to procure particulars before constructing his own.

On the *sombra*'side there was a small canopied gallery for the ladies; Gabriel, as he obeyed Lucía Montalba's summons, observed that all the gentlemen descended to the ring, which was so filled with spectators that it was hard to imagine the bull's failure to register a hit at its first entrance. He sat there, thrilled by the strange, entrancing spectacle; half a dozen men, besides Santiago, were on horseback, and he was instantly struck by the beauty and quality of the horses.

Those were the great days of the bullfight, of the *rejoneadores*, when the *suerte* of the horse was at its zenith, and the *muleta* had not yet assumed its formalized rôle in the death scene of the bull. Santiago had already taken him through the stables, and shown him the horses he had bred and trained specially for the ring, and Gabriel, who had an ardent love for horses, was touched beyond expression by the long, liquid glances of dark eyes, by soft noses that nuzzled in his hand, by the sweet docility of these creatures, bred for such a savage purpose, who lifted their heads in response, and knew the slightest change in the tone of their master's voice.

"But they are like humans! I swear to God the grey knows what I am saying to you now!"

Santiago laughed, well pleased by this appreciation of his cherished animals.

"But naturally! How do you think one trains these animals? Not by the spur and bit, but by accustoming them to every whisper of a voice, every movement of a muscle. It is like tuning a musical instrument; they must respond almost to a thought. They must know the thought, almost before it shapes itself in your mind. They must never be treated harshly, or made to fear punishment in any form. Look at this one: a pure-bred Arab, yet he is as docile as a kitten!" said Santiago proudly.

"Do they never get injured——?"

"I allow no one to ride them but myself," answered Santiago, as though this answered the question. "Those two at the end belong to my sister; the bay took a scratch not so long ago, but it was on the hind quarters: they have no sensation, you know, on the haunches—I expect she will be riding it to-day."

She was not, he noticed, on the bay, but on a young black animal whose schooling, to his inexperienced eye, seemed not to be complete, its fiery and impatient deportment earning disapproving looks from Santiago on several occasions. But she cut a splendid figure, as, head flung back, laughing at some compliment from one of her attendant cavaliers, she swung the young black horse round the barricades to give it opportunity to work off some of its energy.

A considerable crowd had gathered behind the stout barriers to watch the diversions of the gentry; composed mainly of ranch hands and the personnel of the stables and corrals, there were not a few who had trudged or ridden out from Havana, among them several professional matadores, who picked up an indifferent living in a neighbourhood where the sport was mainly confined to the gentry, but whose ardour outran professional jealousy on occasions like these. They were sure at least of hospitality at the hacienda, and they would probably have chances of handling the capes, and perhaps making a little publicity for themselves.

What the scene lacked of the formality of the public bullfight it made up in the sparkling sociability of the light-hearted young creole gentry, who stood in the ring, or rode about on their horses, chatting with their acquaintances and showing off the beauty of the horses no less than their own elegance.

Lucía Montalba leaned a little towards him; he felt the soft pressure of her sun-warmed muslins, and her childish face dimpled in the trellised shadow of the mantilla.

"Are you an *aficionado* of the bulls, señor?"

"I have never seen a bullfight, and you will have to explain everything to me," Gabriel told her. His voice carried clearly in the crystalline air, and Isabela, who happened to be immediately below them, lifted her head to laugh.

"You could hardly have a worse preceptor!" she called mockingly up to them. She was flushed, and he felt the mounting current of her excitement with such distinctness that shock ran through his veins. There was no need for Lucía to whisper that bullfighting was the passion of Isabela's life; she glowed, she was transfigured and her beauty became a challenge no less dangerous than the challenge of the bull itself. "Lucía knows next to nothing about the bulls, so don't believe a word she says; I will explain

all to you afterwards," she warned him. "*Dios mio*, what a day! I feel that something very exciting will happen this afternoon."

Gabriel felt a little conspicuous—the only man sitting among the ladies. Every one else was down in the ring—even old Don Pepe, who sat his grey stallion with magnificence. Such uneasiness as Gabriel felt, however, was dispersed in his keen artistic delight in the spectacle, as the riders formed themselves into a cavalcade which swept round the ring with a dazzling display of equestrianship that brought applause from the spectators and a rain of blossoms from the ladies' gallery. Pride, gaiety, nonchalance—all the outstanding qualities of the creole character were displayed in the sparkling exhibition, which made up in brilliance for what it lacked of the portentousness of the formal *corrida*. Death, the president of the true bullfight, withheld his presence from this pleasant diversion of the sportive gentry, who presently wheeled their horses into the narrow passage, or *callejon*, between the inner and outer barriers, where Santiago and Lucía's husband dismounted and disappeared from sight.

"That means they're going to take the first 'pics.' They say it's Santiago's best *suerte* now; he is grown a little too heavy for the darts," explained Lucía. Gabriel was watching the figures who had slipped back into the ring, with the pink capes folded over their arms, to take their stand behind the little wooden shields that were placed at intervals around the barrier. A hush of anticipation had fallen upon the beautiful, golden scene, and the only moving figure was that of Don Pepe, who slowly rode his horse round the *callejon* into the shadow of the gallery, from the front of which he gave the signal to two servants who, crouching above the *toril* arch, hauled suddenly on the ropes that raised the great wooden shutter, while negroes behind them beat on the grill with staves, to drive the bull from its dark seclusion.

He felt the sweat break on his brow, and a tingling in the roots of his hair, as the bull came out, very gently, on to the sand. From Gabriel's point of view, it was, for a bull, a strange-looking beast: all of its colossal weight was in front, with the weight tapering into hindquarters as light and finely muscled as a greyhound's. Its horns spread like antlers; it stood there in the sun that shone in its sides as in a mirror of steel with a curious quietness, and, to Gabriel, this quietness of the bull was the most awful thing he had ever seen—more awful than anything which, from Santiago's descriptions, he had ever imagined.

A sudden nausea horrified him. Could he be about to disgrace himself, his host and the company he was in, by vomiting? He swallowed, with an enormous effort, a mouthful of saliva, feeling as he did so a drawn sensation in his cheeks. There was a weakness in his wrists and behind his knees, which began to tremble; terrified of his companions' noticing, he leaned quickly forward, folding his arms and pressing them on his knees: this gave him, as he desired, the air of being intensely interested. There were many exclamations: "*Qué toro hermoso!*" "*Qué magnifico!*" He was too shy and too sincere to add his own approbation to this chorus of connoisseurs.

A streak of magenta appeared on the sand; a cape trailed by one of the bull-ring servants.

"*Mire—mire Usted!*" Lucía was gasping; she was nodding towards the bull. The stirring in the roots of his hair intensified itself, as he saw, behind

those branching horns, a slow swelling, a lifting of flesh and muscle, a gradual and horrific distortion of the motionless silhouette. At the next moment the great head went down, and, driving his left horn before him, betraying to the watchful eyes of the instructed his disposition, the bull made his first charge in the track of the cape.

The next few seconds were filled with delicious excitement, in which nausea was forgotten, as magenta flickered here and there and human bodies flung themselves hurriedly across the *barrera*. Knowing nothing of the art of the cape, Gabriel was charmed by the movements, by the element of danger—almost to the point of jumping into the ring and chancing his own luck among the sportsmen. He was fully surrendered to the thrill of the spectacle when, at Don Pepe's signal, the horn was blown for the beginning of the second *suerte*, and Santiago and the marqués de Montalba rode slowly into the ring.

Both had assumed the heavy leg-armour of the *picador*, the leather jacket with its padded armpit and the round metal helmet that protects the *picador* if he is thrown from his horse. The horse Santiago was riding was the tallest and heaviest of his stud; it tittupped lightly, making with its rider a sharp, centaurian shadow on the sunbaked sand of the enclosure.

Gabriel saw Santiago straighten his shoulders, gather the reins more firmly and settle the butt of the pike more easily into the right armpit. The watchers on their horses steadied into the stillness of shadows, as he pressed the spur gently against the warm, nervous barrel clipped by his calves, preparing both himself and his horse for the rush of the bull.

Again the capes flickered, coaxing the bull towards its objective. It stood stubbornly, pretending not to see. The marqués wheeled his horse in a wide circle, and a movement of impatience came from the onlookers. The bull, diverted, looked round sullenly, and took a little canter in the direction of Montalba; then appeared to change its mind. Santiago sat like a rock, his right shoulder presented towards the bull, which persisted in ignoring him.

Piqued by the bull's indifference, Montalba made his horse curvet—with the result that he was ill-prepared for the rush when it came, blundered with the *vara*, and, to save his horse, had to evade the stroke—which made his wife bite her lips with mortification, while the spectators laughed ironically. The *cuadrilla* got busy with the capes, for already this bull was showing a tendency to find its *querencia*—the spot in the ring from which, for strategic or sometimes purely psychological reasons, it was both difficult and dangerous to dislodge it.

Suddenly, with a movement of irritation, it tossed itself free of the teasing magenta butterflies, and drove straight for Santiago—dark, purposeful, very valiant. Gabriel felt his heart rise in his throat; how could man and horse, so light, so delicately balanced, withstand that mountain of bone and muscle that hurled itself with a noise of muffled thunder across the burning sand?

He watched, with a sense of nightmare, while the horse, calm, skilful, accustomed to such moments, obeyed its rider's hand: while it rose, with a movement of curious, graceful indolence, gathering its forelegs under its body and then extending them with a suavity of timing that allowed the destructive horns to pass beneath them into air: while Santiago, leaning over, pressed the pike tip with the weight of his whole body and the weight

of his horse deep into the bull's *morillo*, at the same time swinging his horse with a movement so peaceful it was like the rocking of a cradle, to let the pawing feet down quietly upon the sand out of reach of the horns.

It was the apotheosis of the *picador's* art, and although not so uncommon in those days as in our own, when the *suerte* is degraded by the mercenary use of dilapidated horses, it drew roars of applause from the onlookers. As the pike was withdrawn it was followed by the shining trickle of dark blood; the bull stood still, astonished, indignant, but by no means abashed, and Don Santiago de Lorcha chuckled gently and rode back towards his audience, patting the sweating neck of his horse. It was characteristic of Santiago that he thought more, at that moment, of his triumph as a ranch-owner than of his personal prowess in the ring. The bull was a good bull, and it was magnificent sport—the finest in the world, he was thinking, as his strong, sinuous hand, heavily ringed with gold, rested upon the thin, glowing neck of the oldest and most sensible of the eight horses he had bred and trained himself.

Montalba's turn passed almost unnoticed, so anxious was everybody to congratulate and praise Santiago for his excellent performance. "That will do for to-day," he was laughing, as they lifted him down and unstrapped his armour. "I'll take the darts after this, and you others can take your turn with the pike." "He's still strong on the left, Santiago. *Hombre, qué toro!* You can carve up his shoulder muscle and he makes no more of it than a pin scratch." He pushed them laughingly aside, and went to find his sister.

Isabela was already in the saddle, the reins gathered on her horse's neck, the *banderillas* for the coming *suerte* lightly clasped in her gloved right hand. She looked down at him with a smile that was partly proud and partly mocking. For once he did not smile as he looked at her; he lowered his voice, so that those close to them might not hear. He knew he had come on a foolish errand; he frowned, and there was antagonism in his glance.

"Very good, *hermano mio!*" she greeted him, and tapped his shoulder lightly with the ribboned shaft of the *banderilla*, in the fashion of an accolade.

"I have not come for your congratulations. It is eight or nine weeks since you played with the bulls."

"Pues——?"

"This is a three-year-old beast, and his father made history in Havana. You remember the day?"

"He killed four men, didn't he, and sent Pedro Matanzas into hospital for six months?" she said carelessly; her eyes defied him.

"Pedro Matanzas is serving beans behind a counter, with a hole in him they keep on stuffing up with tow. The bull that got him was a bull to fight, not to be played with," said Santiago curtly.

"And what has that got to do with me?" she challenged.

"I suppose you want to display yourself before the Englishman?" he sneered. Hate and love so strove in him that he could not look at her; he scraped the toe of his shoe in the sand. She answered, with exaggerated sweetness:

"I do not fight bulls for the entertainment of Englishmen, *hermano mio*, but for my own amusement."

"Then, for your own amusement, you are likely to make a fool of yourself with this bull," he told her, and left her.

The emotions he had so far experienced paled, for Gabriel, when, among the three figures that rode out on the sand, which the bull's blood now had spattered, he recognized the condesa de Coria. His admiration for these Cubans had already reached its zenith; like many people who are a little inept in physical exploits, he had a profound respect for those who excelled. The careless gallantry of Santiago and his companions called out his admiration and his envy; he felt sadly that it was no wonder María Cayetúña idolized her husband.

The three slender figures, swaying lightly in their saddles, arms hanging by their sides with a *banderilla* swinging from each hand, presented a picture of indolent confidence that heightened the already tense atmosphere. There was now very little gossip among the ladies, not a few of whom regarded with jealous resentment this accomplishment of the condesa's which, for the time being at least, drew all masculine attention.

The bull, far from being reduced by the previous *suerte*, was now tearing up the sand with rage that was augmented by the stream of blood from his shoulder that made a puddle beside his near fore foot. The cape-handlers had become wary; no tricks were attempted. Even the most ignorant of the spectators was conscious of the fact that this bull was not one of the average produced by hospitable ranch owners for the amusement of their guests.

So suddenly that Gabriel's breath was taken away, the young black horse and its rider darted across the sand. Isabela's arms were raised above her head, the wrists drooping at the approved angle for placing the darts—an exquisite attitude that reveals all the perfection of line of which the human body is capable. It looked as though she was going to plant them in that one movement; but at the last moment, the instinct of the horse proving superior to that of its rider, it swerved with a motion that would have unseated a less skilled performer, and made light of the bull's attack with a circling canter.

There followed that breath-taking duel of horse and bull that is familiar to all who have known the almost extinct art of the *rejoneador*: with seconds when the tip of the horn seemed less than a hairbreadth from those sensitive hind quarters: with moments when the movements of the opponents assumed almost the formality of a classic dance. Guided by its rider's knees, the young black horse was everywhere at once, the bull's cunning deserting it with its mounting rage as it expended its energy in futile charges. Suddenly, capriciously, it seemed, it transferred its attention from Isabela to one of the other riders, but it soon appeared that she resented this.

Don Pepe, below the gallery, swore viciously as she cut between the charging bull and his objective in a fashion that brought a hiss of alarm from all the spectators.

"What is this? *Madre mia de mi alma*, it is not the *suerte* of the darts, it is circus riding!" the old man was exploding. "That is not a bull to

take liberties with! And you!" He turned savagely upon Santiago, who had ridden to his side, and whose face was dark with anger and misgiving. "Is this a bull to let your sister amuse herself with? You would have got good money for this at the *corrida*!"

Santiago bit his lip; it was what he himself had been thinking. He did not usually waste his best animals for his private sport, but this beast had been deceptive. He had known it was good, but not *so* good, and he had wanted, on Gabriel's account, to put up a good show.

"She is doing it to impress the *inglés*!" the ladies were whispering. "It would serve her right if——"

A yell cracked the sky over the little bullring. By an act of insane and discreditable daring, since it risked her horse as well as herself, Isabela had planted her pair of darts. One was truly home, the other hung down, caught only by a barb; she looked at it resentfully across her shoulder as she rode away. Gabriel felt the wooden tiers swaying under him as he rose to applaud her success, and not a few eyes marked him down as the latest of Isabela de Coria's victims. So much worse for the *inglés*! He had not yet made the acquaintance of the conde.

The next performer was cautious, tricky, and, by manœuvring in a disapproved fashion—riding the bull down from behind—placed a neat pair which, to Gabriel's surprise, was received with little acclamation. Even little Lucía Montalba was scornful.

"If I did it from behind, like that, I could put the darts in myself!"

The infuriated beast was plunging round the *barrera*, the darts clacking behind its head, trying by furious drives of its shoulder against the wood to tear the barbs out of its flesh. Gabriel felt suddenly overwhelmingly conscious of the heat, of a stifling something in the atmosphere that made him strain for breath; he looked at the flushed faces, at the women delicately removing the sweat from their faces with perfumed handkerchiefs; the perfume struggled with the smell of sweat, of blood, of bull. He felt himself shrinking from the savagery of the scene, deploring it as a spectacle for women, disliking Isabela's share in it. . . .

"Third pair," said Lucía laconically. "They are Miguel's—he is not good with the darts. Look, Isabela wants to take them! That's because she nearly missed with one of hers. But he won't let her! Miguel doesn't approve of women fighting bulls——"

"Santiago is going in," Gabriel interrupted her to remark.

"Santiago? But it's not his turn. He always takes the last bull——"

They could see the condesa's imperious gestures, the reluctance of the man to whom she was speaking. A yell from the men on foot interrupted their argument, and they wheeled their horses aside as the bull rushed between them, with a vicious right and left that missed both objectives. They saw Isabela gallop across the ring and snatch a pair of *banderillas* from the negro boy who stood there with his arms full of them.

"She's mad! She's not going to put in a fourth pair? The bull will look like a pincushion!" came from an incredulous observer. The marqués de Montalba was playing for opportunity, the capes were busy. Santiago cantered across to intercept his sister's return.

"You have no right to spoil Miguel's sport!" he hissed at her angrily.

"Am I not to have sport?"

"You are making it dangerous for everybody! If something happens, they are bound to think of you, and not of themselves!"

"You are not getting frightened of your own bulls, are you, little brother?" she jeered at him. Santiago's face was livid; from his earliest childhood, set up on his pony, with a pike hardly thicker than a young shoot of sugar-cane under his arm, he had charged the little bull calves in the pasture; by the time he was fourteen there was nothing he could not tackle, and the slaves and land-workers called him "The Man-Horse," for the unity between the youth and his mount was so complete that it was as though the same channels of thought served them both. But he had never been a fool, and all the time he was talking to her he felt in every nerve the welter of movement that was going on behind him. While he could not speak for anger,

"Stand out of my way!" she said, and, leaning forward, rapped the nose of his horse with the shaft of her *banderilla*.

The highly strung animal, which had never been treated in such a fashion before, reared wildly, and for the next few seconds all the skill he possessed was centred in calming it. As it steadied beneath his hand, he raised his head, to see an incredible sight.

The bull and Isabela on her horse were rushing at one another: with such velocity and such an angle that their avoidance of impact was inconceivable. Had she gone mad, and communicated her madness to a horse which he had already warned her was insufficiently trained for the ring? He saw in a flash that, although the horse might swerve at the last moment, it would certainly take off with the wrong foot, and fall, and, while the onlookers screamed, and the cape-handlers, left far behind, tore panting in the wake of the bull, he drove the spurs into his horse's ribs and rode at the senseless pair.

As he drew level with Isabela, he saw from the whiteness of her cheek and her bared teeth that were clenched on a flying lock of hair that she was fully aware of her danger, but that her insane pride and the vanity which had led her to attempt this exploit would not allow her to lower her hands, which poised the *banderillas*, to get them on the reins and give the panic-stricken horse the guidance it needed. With a smothered curse he resigned his own animal to its inescapable fate as he took the only possible chance: forcing it into Isabela's with an impact that knocked over both horse and rider.

He saw the sand rising to meet him, heard the thud and the horse's grunt as the bull's head hit it, started to roll, let out a yell as the horse crashed back on him, thought, "I'm safe, at least, if my horse is on top of me!"—and in the midst of a blind anguish that was the taste of sand and blood and a roaring of bull's breath and the squealing of an agonized horse, felt something smash into his shoulder, and lost sight of everything.

CHAPTER IX

I

THE military surgeon, who was fortunately on the spot, as one of the spectators, washed out the wound, plugged and bound it, before turning his attention to Santiago's legs—one of which was broken by his horse's falling back on it, the other had a torn muscle: both trivial matters in comparison with the hole in his shoulder, through which the bull's horn had passed from back to front, nailing him to the sand only an inch below his collar bone. These operations were borne by Santiago with white-lipped fortitude, before the circle of his friends, who, shocked by the sinister conclusion to the entertainment, rode, some of them, to Buonaventura, while Gabriel, shaking off the women who clung about him, found his own horse and galloped to the ranch-house.

"What is it? Something has happened——!"

He looked down into the blue-white globes of her eyes, on which the great brown iris floated, and threw himself off the horse to stand by her side.

"They're taking him to Buonaventura," he told her, at the end of his brief account of the misadventure.

"To Buonaventura? Why?"

"It is by Don Pepe's orders."

She gave him one stark look, thrust the baby into his arms, and, before he could guess her object, was up and across the horse that trembled beside them. The flounces of her gown bundled and spread, leaving exposed almost to the knee a brown leg slim as a gazelle's, as, swinging the horse about, she bent, snatched the crop out of Gabriel's hand, and, striking the horse across the crupper, streaked across the grass towards the distant gates.

He heard the creole nurse scream as he stood there, half-stunned, the infant in his arms. The scream brought others running from the house; he almost flung the child to its nurse as he yelled: "A horse—for God's sake!" Were there any animals left in the stables? They had taken an extra four over to Buonaventura, for the use of guests who might prefer to rest their own beasts before riding back to Havana. He found himself running towards the sheds; after an unspeakable delay, he was across a raking chestnut with bandaged hocks, who pounded across the turf in the hoof-prints of María Cayetúña's grey.

As the gate-posts flashed past he caught sight, on the crest of the nearest hill, of a moving speck that was the girl and the horse: she was going like a lunatic, her gown ballooning behind her. There was no hope of catching up on the chestnut, which already faltered in its stride; he could only follow on and hope to be there by the time she had need of him.

As he topped the rise, the broad expanses of Santiago's ranch stretched before him in folds of summer-yellowed grass, across which ran the paler ribbons of the tracks leading to Buonaventura and to the ranch-house. About the middle of the plain the two tracks met and united, proceeding thence to

the dip in the earth in which was concealed the bull-ring. Far on the horizon the grazing herd, unconscious of the fact that one of their number was even now fulfilling his destiny, moved like flies upon that melting rim where tawny earth met tawny sky.

Over the shoulder that hid the bull-ring a slow-moving cavalcade made its appearance: people on foot and people on horseback. No one was distinguishable at that distance, but Gabriel guessed from the movement of the horses that most of them were women. He saw the white and grey speck that was María Cayetuña racing towards them along the ranch-house track.

. . . She had knotted the ends of her *velo* beneath her chin and as she saw the people approaching, she shook down the folds of her gown that had blown back across her thighs, and, lifting first one leg and then the other, tucked the stuff in between her calf and the sweat-drenched side of her horse, which never slackened its pace. Thanks be to God that Santiago had taught her to ride!—although never in this way, across the saddle like a man. The whole of her body ached and felt bruised with the unaccustomed posture—but she would bring him back to his own home! He should not stay in Buonaventura, among her enemies.

Yes, there was Isabela, her arm bandaged and slung, but she led the company, laughing and talking as though the whole business did her credit. Yes, you! You nearly lost me my husband. Unconsciously María Cayetuña's fingers tightened on the reins, her hand with the crop in it dropped to her side. And beside Isabela rode Asunción Gamborena: greener than ever, her reddish hair looking faded in the sunset, all the lines on her face showing, and her little pointed teeth clutched on a quivering lower lip. She and Isabela had become very friendly since Santiago's marriage; perhaps they consoled each other. Here was the woman who had born to Santiago the son he so passionately desired. The youth was called Gamborena, and was at least fifteen years old; it made no difference to the ache in María Cayetuña's heart.

Thus, for the first time since her marriage, she came face to face with the proud Havanese society that had scorned her, and connived at the humiliation of an innocent little girl, fresh out of Santa Clara. As more and more of them came over the lip of the hill she saw them staring at her, saw their looks of curiosity and amusement, saw them turning to each other to pass remarks. Had she no proper riding clothes, this *mestiza*? Santiago would be nicely mortified if he were to witness this spectacle! These were the people who refused to acknowledge her as Santiago's wife, who dared to deny the legitimacy of her child.

She slowed the horse to a canter, allowed it to drop into a walk. She could now hear the ragged gallop of Gabriel's lame animal, beating the turf behind her. But she would not wait for him. She needed no support in the coming encounter.

"*Olá, la cuñadal!*" The condesa's bold voice broke the silence that had fallen, as María Cayetuña rode up to the group. "You have given yourself more trouble than you need. Santiago has been well looked after, and we are taking him to Buonaventura, where they are all used to little mishaps of this kind——"

Whether by accident or deliberately, her horse had sidled itself broadsides across the track, and formed, with Asunción Gamborena's, a barrier behind

which the rest were gathered. The men, Montalba, Asunción's husband, and one of the Aroche cousins, looked amused.

It would have been easy for María Cayetuña to have swung her horse, to have passed them on either side; she stood her ground.

"Do me the favour," she requested, in the mild voice of one by whom favours are taken for granted, "of allowing me to pass."

A thin laugh broke from the pale lips of Asunción Gamborena.

"Really! I had no idea she spoke the castellano!"

"What else should I speak, señora?"

Failing to find a retort to the simple query, the elder woman reined her horse contemptuously aside.

"Pray go on; I at least have no desire to detain you."

"A thousand thanks, señores, for your courtesy," said María Cayetuña, as she availed herself of the space they grudgingly made for her. Several of the men made to raise their hats; others, fearing the reproach of their companions, hurriedly concentrated upon the latter. As she rode on, a high voice followed her:

"Did you ever see such insolence from a creature in her position! And you see the fashion in which she is riding!"

Gabriel caught up with her at the gates of the bull-ring.

"You are all right? You suffered no unpleasantness?"

She looked at him vaguely, reined her horse and leaned towards him.

"Help me down. What does it matter, now I am here?"

He gave her his arm, to pass through the crowd of staring watchers who hung about the entrance to the shed in which Santiago was lying. Few of them had seen de Lorcha's "wife" before, but among these, who did not belong to "society," there was no lack of courtesy; hats were snatched off and sympathetic murmurs followed their passage into the little shed whose dark interior was barred with the setting sun. Against the grille of the window appeared the faces of all those who had not managed to gain entrance to the already crowded room. Nearly everybody was smoking, and Don Pepe and the surgeon were chatting as though they had not a care in the world, while Sombra, Santiago's man, crouched by his master, wiping away the sweat as it gathered and rolled down his brow.

She was on her knees beside him, her arms flung across his body. Santiago's eyes opened, his consciousness swam back from some pit of pain to acknowledge his wife, his lips parted in a smile that was horribly contradicted by the anguish of his brow.

"What are you doing here, *gloria mia*? I am all right—it is nothing." Then, as though the effort of speaking were too much, his head rolled aside on the pillow of capes they had made for him and he lay very still, with the wet blood darkening on his shirt.

"He'll be all right when we get him to the house," Don Pepe was saying. His face was very old, and all its lines had deepened in the last hour, so that it resembled a carving in old, soft wood; he was smoking a long, yellow cigar, and the muscles on his jaw stood out like iron. "We are taking him"—he turned to María Cayetuña—"to Buenaventura."

"But—but I have come to take him home."

"He is my son, and his home is Buenaventura."

"He is my husband, and his home is with me!"

"There is plenty of room for you at Buonaventura," said Don Pepe, not unkindly; he was disposed to like his daughter-in-law, although her peccadillo about negroes irritated and offended him. She was beautiful, and he knew what Santiago saw in her; that mixture of white and coloured blood had an attraction of its own. But she had not yet brought him her dowry; if that went astray, it would be a nice affair! The boy would have done better to marry someone less attractive, who brought her money in her hand. Nevertheless, he both spoke and looked kindly; there was no doubt about her love for his son.

"*Muchas gracias, suegro mio*," stammered María Cayetuña; she had scrambled to her feet, and stood pitifully before the old man, her small hands clenched in the crushed folds of her skirt. "You are all that is generous, all that is benevolent! But I will, with your permission, take Santiago back with me. I cannot leave my baby, and—and the care of my household. But I must nurse my husband myself! He will only get better for me."

"*Madre de dios*, what do you know about nursing? The blacks are the best nurses in the world, and they know how to treat a sore place like that"—he pointed to the blood, and she whitened; but before she could reply, Gabriel had spoken.

"*Señor*, I have more than a little experience of nursing, and it would please me to make some return for my cousin's hospitality. Do me the favour of letting me undertake this responsibility. Besides," he added, racking his brain for some argument which might be conclusive, "it is going to hurt him to be moved, and the ranch-house is at least half an hour nearer than Buonaventura. That, sir, is surely worth consideration?" He turned to the surgeon, who winked, and presently, as Don Pepe continued his refusals, drew him aside.

"Better at the ranch-house. The old man's place is pandemonium, and cases like this are better kept quiet."

"Is there danger?"

The surgeon plucked a snuff-yellowed upper lip.

"Not if the wound's clean. I've done the best I can with it, but it must be kept open for the next few days. Watch out for the pus; a bull's horn's rarely clean, and if it poisons you'll have trouble."

"Then you'll support us in taking him back to the ranch-house?"

But to this the surgeon made no satisfactory answer; no doubt he had something to lose by quarrelling with Don Pepe. The argument was still raging when the ox-wagon, which had been sent out from Buonaventura, with mattresses laid across the wooden slats, arrived, escorted by a band of negroes who came wailing and crying to see their wounded master. María Cayetuña's lips stiffened.

With a movement of sudden decision she turned to Gabriel.

"Are you strong enough to lift him?"

"What—alone?" He knew, with shame, that he could not support that great weight of bone and muscle that lay there, unable to help itself.

Thrusting the rest aside, Done Pepe strode to the door and flung it open; dark faces, a glitter of white teeth and eyeballs pressed towards him, behind them the oxen stood meek in the failing light.

"Sabadeo—Zacarias——" He named them, and tall bodies in the cotton slacks of the landworkers shouldered their way through the crush to *El Viejo's* side. The Old One; he was still their master, and with the Young One lying unaware, they took their orders from none but him. "Carry my son to the cart."

With the curiously tender movements of the negro, they lifted him; raised his slack shoulders and his lolling head, supported his knees and laid him very gently on the mattresses. The air was soft as milk, and full of the sweetness of dusk; a few stars shone palely through the muslin of the dark. Santiago's dead horse was being dragged out of the ring, and the men heaving on the ropes dropped them to run and look into the cart, which, drawn by the rolling oxen, lurched on to the broad track across the plain.

Don Pepe mounted his horse, and, accompanied by some of the men, rode off by the short cut to Buonaventura which was impossible for the wagon. He knew his servants would not dare to disobey him. His son would come to Buonaventura, which had cradled him through all his sicknesses, where his own kith and kin waited to care for him, where his bed was now being prepared in the room he had occupied up to the time of his marriage.

Gabriel and María Cayetuña rode a little ahead of the wagon, in which Sombra still crouched by his master's side. She did not speak. They had found her a side-saddle, and she sat hunched in an attitude of exhaustion, while time went by and the plain seemed to roll out endlessly, passing from the brown-grey of dusk into the blue of night, and the sky prickled with stars whose restless glitter made foil for the small, calm, crescent moon. And so they came to the crossroads, where they waited for the wagon to catch up with them.

Creaking and rolling, it approached, the mild-eyed, foolish beasts leaning towards each other under the wooden yoke, the negro driver nodding on his seat above their haunches.

Right for Buonaventura, left for the ranch-house. Instinct seemed to stir as they reached the crossroads; the drowsing negro leaned forward out of his dreams to use the long stick that guided his cattle.

María Cayetuña had straightened on her horse; the moonlight streamed down her white gown and silvered the delicate profile of her lifted head.

"*Izquierda!*"

The man either did not hear, or was too stupid to understand; in any case, he had his master's orders. The stick descended, the great heads of the oxen swung slowly right.

María Cayetuña kicked her horse, which shifted nervously broadsides to the oncoming cattle, who, seeing its shadow, paused uncertainly. The negro lifted his bullet head and blinked at his master's wife.

"*No entiendes? Izquierda.*"

"*B'onaventu'a—derecha, señora,*" he mumbled.

"We are going to the ranch-house, not to Buonaventura. Turn left, as I tell you."

Gabriel had never struck a negro in his life, but his hand tightened on the crop, and he rode threateningly up to the side of the driver, who started to whimper and protest. The body-servant rose behind him, to see what was going on. Swearing that Don Pepe would kill him for not obeying his orders,

the driver scrambled off the wagon and started to run away across the moonlit grass.

"Shall I fetch him back?"

"Let him go; does anything matter but getting Santiago home?" She told the other man to pick up the driver's stick. This one, a more civilized specimen, was more or less articulate in his explanation that Don Pepe had given his orders, which it was more than his life was worth to disobey.

"I will be responsible for your life."

Still he shook his stubborn, woolly head. A deep groan came from the bottom of the cart.

Suddenly María Cayetuña began to speak. She spoke rapidly, leaning forward to stare fully into the man's eyes, using words that Gabriel did not understand, although they seemed to be Spanish. The man's expression changed, to one of horror; all at once he gave a scream, and threw up his arm before his face; he was crouching, babbling with terror, then he was throwing himself off the cart to pick up the stick the other had dropped, and scrambling back into the driver's seat. The heads of the oxen bored blindly towards the left.

Gabriel cast one look at the man's face, which was working with evident terror, and down which the tears were pouring, and glanced hastily aside. It was not good to see such a look on a human face, if it were only a negro's. Gabriel did not know what any of it meant; he only knew that, while María Cayetuña was speaking, it was as though the moon darkened. A drop of ice ran down his spine.

"What was it you said to him?"

He had to repeat the question; she sat there, still leaning forward, as though moon-frozen; her face seemed reduced to its merest elements of blanched bone, the sight of her eyes had turned inward, her lips hung open, as though the last murmured syllable had paralysed them.

"*Prima mia*—what was it?"

Her shoulders contracted with a slight shiver, and the sight came back to her eyes; it was like the return to consciousness of a sleep-walker, and instinctively he threw out his hand to support her in the saddle.

"It was—I do not know what it was. Nothing." Her body sagged, as with an access of weariness, but a slight tightening of the rein sent her horse forward. Only when they came within sight of home she straightened herself, sent at him the silver shaft of her smile bleached by the moonlight, and rode through the guarded gateway of the Villa.

II

The rains had started, and the annual festival of Nuestra Señora de la Caridad ended in a downpour, which drowned the twelve angels with tapers in their hands and swamped the booths and sideshows that contributed to the gaiety of the celebrants. All manner of dwarfs, of mountebanks, jugglers, touts and tricksters, who flocked to Havana to reap the harvest of the great religious holiday, huddled miserably under their flapping awnings, staring at the sky as though they had forgotten that nature could be so cruel as to betray them.

Gabriel got soaked to the skin, having ridden in alone to have a look at the spectacle, and caught a heavy cold.

Buonaventura lay heavy under its weight of rains, and across the far pastures where the cattle grazed hung a dank curtain of vapour that was partly from above, partly condensation from the summer-warmed earth.

"When does he go?"

"When does who go?"

"Who but your cousin?" He looked at her, for a moment, as though he hated her—or hated her evasion.

"Pues—Santiago *mio*!" she gasped. "One cannot send a guest away!"

He chewed his lower lip, watching her beneath his gathered brows, seeking the roots of her sadness, seeking truth behind that grave young brow.

Incredible as it seemed to all who had witnessed the incident, Santiago was making rapid recovery, his violent will to live proving the best ally for the two who, for the first three weeks, had hardly left his bedside. Latterly, his improved condition, his insistence on seeing his father (Don Pepe having forgiven his daughter-in-law the more readily that her devotion to her husband was shown in his rapidly increasing strength) and the overseers of the plantation and ranch, had given them liberty to interest themselves in things outside the sick room. How had they employed their liberty, those two?

"You will miss him when he goes," he said smoothly.

"Why—why—of course I shall miss him." She made a little movement of resignation. "Is he not the only one of my relations I have ever met? And I am sure no one could have been kinder; think how he has helped to nurse you since you were ill! I could hardly have done it all by myself."

"There was no need for you to do anything. There are plenty of people at Buonaventura who would have come at your call. Why are you doing that?" he broke off to demand. With a little brush in her hand, she was sweeping around the hearth, where the wind had blown the charred sticks and ash from the wide grate. "*Sancta Maria*!" exploded Santiago. "Do I wish my wife to be a maid of all work? Why keep servants unless you make them do their duties?"

She straightened herself to look at him with such innocent reproachfulness that he was ashamed of his ill temper, although he made no effort to control it.

"It is because Encarnación and Pepita have gone to their instruction. Don't you remember? I asked you if you minded, and you said they could see the priest, if he came, down by the laundries. The confirmation is quite soon——"

Santiago snorted impatiently, turning his head away. She looked at him for a moment, with something like despair in her eyes; then, coming to a decision, approached the bed.

"*Esposo mio*—I must ask you. It is so long since I asked you—you will not be angry with me now? I have nursed you day and night, I have not troubled you about anything——"

"What is it?" he muttered.

She went on her knees, folding her trembling hands on the edge of the bed.

"If you love me, let María Pía be baptized." As he made an angry movement, she went on hurriedly. "It would be so easy, with the priest coming every week."

"I have told you. I will not beg favours of the Church!"

"Ay, Santiago, what favour is it? The Church offers its sacraments to us all—there is no begging to be done," she said sadly.

He was stubbornly silent.

"Santiago *mio*, for the sake of our baby's little soul!"

When he spoke at last he was evidently controlling himself.

"*Cariña*: have I not told you there is no soul? The soul is an invention; it is a scarecrow of the Church, to frighten fools and keep them in subjection. When I die my body goes into the earth, and presently it is bones, and presently a little heap of dust; and that is the end." (And why was there sweat on his brow, and his fingers crisped into the bedclothes? He waited a little, to make sure of no supernal reprisals for the blasphemy, before continuing on a louder and bolder note.) "The soul is life, and when life is ended the soul ends too."

"You did not always think so," she reminded him.

"I was brought up, like every one else, to observe the forms of religion; but—bah!" cried Santiago. "Am I a fool, to take religion like a child takes medicine for a pain in its stomach? I am strong!" He struck his chest angrily. "You have seen, these weeks past, that I am strong. You would have fetched the priest, to cheat me of my strength—don't contradict; I know it. It was you who fixed up that thing above my bed"—he pointed to the crucifix which, since his illness, had made its appearance on the whitewashed wall—"knowing that I have forbidden the use of all such symbols of superstition in my house since we came back from Jamaica——"

"You had but to say the word and I would have taken it away again," she told him humbly.

"You fixed it there knowing I was too sick to protest!" he insisted, suppressing the fact of his own dread of ordering a thing to be removed which might—who knew?—have effect on the course of his illness. "Do I take notice of such things?" he demanded superbly. "I speak of it now only to show that I am not blind to the betrayals of my enemies."

"Santiago, you do not speak of me as your enemy?"

"You are my enemy," he told her stubbornly, "when you take the part of those who are against me."

"That I have never done; you know it. Have I not obeyed you in every particular, from the day we were married, even though it meant disobeying all the rule in which I was brought up?" She felt herself trembling inwardly, for thirteen years of Catholic training are not disposed of thus, and there were days when she yearned for the beneficent shade of Santa Clara: a yearning she knew better than to confess to Santiago. She was now barely seventeen, and had passed three-quarters of her life in the convent; she had, it was true, forsaken it of her own free will, but she had not then foreseen that marriage meant severance from all on which her sense of security was built. The roots of Catholicism, frail as they were, were knit into the fabric of her being, and all her love for Santiago could not expel the fear that sometimes went through her, like a sharp knife, when he denied the faith. This recurrent fear, which love bade her conceal, had had a deeper effect on her character, even, than her marriage; the rebellious strength which had made her struggle, in Santa Clara, for liberty was gone, and with it, although this she did not realize, one of the mainsprings of her living; but, having filled the void—or so she believed—

with love, she seldom repined, save when these violent moods of Santiago's, fortunately as rare as they were intolerable, made her fear for his safety, and hers.

"I carry the burden of my sins as I carry the burden of my body," he was saying, "and if there is any burning, may I be condemned to it eternally if I invoke the Church for myself or for any of my belongings."

III

"I've already told you," said Gabriel, "that I do not believe you will ever get satisfaction until you go yourself and prove that you are not a person to be trifled with. Come, you are almost better, but it will be long before you are able to resume your ordinary life again. You have deputies who are to be trusted, your affairs here are running smoothly; why don't you make use of the opportunity to visit England and settle your wife's business for good and all?"

Santiago looked at him with the incredulity of one to whom is proposed a trip to the North Pole.

"I would gladly accompany you and act as your cicerone."

They were not alone; one of the Rodríguez boys from San Juan de Remedios—younger brother to the Estebán Matthew had met in Barbados—and the marqués de Montalba, constant visitors during Santiago's illness, were in the room; they exchanged glances as Gabriel made his offer. Young Rodríguez was a lively type, who concealed beneath an exaggerated frivolity of manner his keen devotion to his work as a planter. Between San Juan de Remedios and Buonaventura a sharp yet friendly rivalry had existed for nearly a century. The marqués's manner to his young companion was faintly tinged with superiority; his chapetone ancestry inclined him on all occasions to patronage in dealing with creoles, although his long friendship with Santiago, which was founded on mutual interest in all valorous forms of sport, led to an exception in the latter's case.

"And my wife? And my child?" Santiago was asking.

"Take them with you." Gabriel said it laughingly. Of course Santiago would never commit himself to a journey which would entail at least a year's absence from Buonaventura; but it was a fantasy it might divert him to indulge.

Santiago smiled, reluctantly accepting the joke.

"I would rather raise loans in anticipation of the decision of the courts."

"*Hombre!*" The marqués interrupted; a lazy smile was on his small, tobacco-coloured face; his long acquaintance entitled him to candour. "Haven't you had enough of that already? I met Montoya yesterday, with a face as long as a gun-barrel; Pérez had been trying to borrow money from him—you know there's a band of loose niggers that have burnt up his little place at Matanzas—?"

"Pérez is a bad *guajiro*; the last lot of grain he sold me had weevil in it," grunted Santiago.

"He got nothing out of Montoya, who told him he couldn't afford to lend money to the smallholders; he'd got all he could do to meet the requirements of Buonaventura!"

Both visitors laughed heartily at this dubious joke, which raised Gabriel's eyebrows. Creole humour was a thing to which he found it difficult to become acclimatized; it was based too often on someone's embarrassment. Not, of course, that Santiago was embarrassed; he had long made public jest—at least among his intimates—of Buonaventura's impecuniosity. Probably because he did not feel himself responsible, he was known, on occasion, to take an almost malicious pleasure in exposing the bareness of the family larder. It did not matter, since very few people believed that the de Lorchas were really poor.

Rodríguez was the first to recover his sobriety.

"*Sin embargo*, it would be awkward for you, *hombre*, if your father were to die within the next few months."

Santiago swore profusely.

"Who talks of my father dying?"

"No one, naturally; every one in these parts has the greatest regard for Don Pepe, and wishes that he may live for ever," said the marqués, with a slight frown of reproof for his blunt companion. "But even regard doesn't confer immortality. He has reached a great age."

He placed a cigar between his thin lips. As a leading member of the powerful *Compañía de Capa y Espada*, a hereditary *alcalde* and an active agent in the many agricultural reforms that the settlement of 1765 had brought to the island, he was a person of importance, and had the Governor's ear. Don Diego José García de Valladares was a man of marked kindness, efficiency and honesty—he was both too kind and too honest for many of his colleagues; yet even he, as Montalba pointed out, was, like lesser men, bound by existing law, which forbade the tenure of Cuban property by heretics or any that did not conform to Catholic rule.

"If your father dies—as they have been waiting for him to die for the last three years—the government will have no option but to exercise its prerogative."

"*Madre de dios!*" roared Santiago. "And what is its prerogative? Is it not laid down in the Chapter of 1648: 'Excommunication, being a spiritual punishment, does not prejudice the excommunicate in nor deprive him of his civil rights'?"

"Certainly; but you know how things are here. . . . And it would not involve you unduly if you were to take steps to safeguard your position."

"Have such steps been proposed?" Gabriel cast a glance at Santiago, who was glaring at the coverlet, and refused to look at the speaker.

Montalba nodded.

"I have a personal message from the Governor, saying that while he is prepared to exercise every possible leniency, and, in conjunction with the Commissioners, would grant such extension of time as they and he think reasonable, he is bound by his office—and so on, and so on! It's such a message as would only be sent to one for whom His Excellency has the highest personal regard, and—candidly, I'd take the hint, if I were you."

"Take the hint to purchase my own property?" sneered Santiago. Gabriel sat silent, trying to understand what it was all about. "Take the hint to buy myself back into the Church, for the sake of holding what is my own? And what, may I ask, is the price they are asking?"

"This isn't a matter of shop, de Lorcha," said young Rodríguez, who had evidently been discussing the matter with the marqués, and overdid his solemnity, as he did his levity, at times.

"Never!" Santiago smote the bed. "If the money were here, here in my two hands"—he cupped them, the sinews trembling with the violence of his emotion—"I would not give a penny to purchase that which is mine. I have here two hundred men who can carry a gun; I can raise thrice the number in Havana. Let them start their confiscation, and I'll show them I can defend my property—if it means taking the Morro itself!"

"It will cost you more than your interview with Echevarría." Montalba dryly named the bishop who had succeeded Morell.

"Let the Church come to me; I will never go to the Church. And with what would I pay? More loans, you say—or my wife's money. Ask my cousin there what our chances are of seeing the colour of it. Isn't there war in America. Hasn't the British Government had to send relief to the Barbados planters, who can't find markets for the stuff they're producing? Little as my honoured cousin concerns himself with such matters"—he did not conceal the sneer in his voice—"common knowledge is enough to show that my wife's relations can't afford to part with the money that belongs by right to her."

"Common knowledge also shows," said Gabriel coolly, "that what we can afford or what we cannot afford will not affect British jurisprudence, when it is convinced of the justice of my cousin's claim."

"By the time it is convinced," muttered Santiago, "it will be too late."

"In my opinion," said the marqués, waving his hand with the cigar in it vaguely towards Gabriel, "you might do much worse than this señor has suggested. A visit to England—it is not an impossibility; and if it hastens the settlement——"

This discussion went on interminably, with all the long-windedness of creole argument; and Gabriel, sitting mainly silent, was conscious of Santiago's enmity, reaching towards him like a dark hand across the room.

CHAPTER X

I

SANTIAGO was propped up in bed, listening to his foreman, who brought unwelcome news from Buonaventura.

It started with the escape of four men who were known on the plantation as mischief-makers. One, a recent arrival, had been marked down from the start as a dangerous party; he bore the stamp of the murderer, his debased simian features topped a six-foot body of immense muscularity. From the start he had refused to work: had taken floggings that would have ruined an ordinary man, and was known as a thief among his neighbours in the bohios.

"I wish to God I had hanged the fellow!"

Santiago was uneasy as well as irritated. The striped Mexican coverings of the bed were flung aside, his great limbs, the right leg still in splints, moved restlessly, as he cursed the fate that found him helpless at such a time.

"How many men can you spare to hunt?"

"Not more than half a dozen, señor. The devil has sown his seeds, and unless we watch we may find ourselves in the middle of a rising."

"A rising? There has never been a rising—a real rising—on Buonaventura!"

López spread out the palms of his yellow hands; they were hands, Gabriel noticed, like the claws of a bird of prey; they bore out the sickening impression of a face as pitiless as iron. López had seen many risings, and dealt with them after his own fashion—by burning and hanging; his solitary sport—if sport can be associated with so venomous a being—was slave-hunting, to which he brought all the invention of a nature devoid of humanity.

"We might nip it in the bud; but we aren't so overstocked at present as to afford extravagance!"

"What were you saying about getting in a new lot before the harvests start?"

López shrugged his shoulders.

"Unless the cattle they send down next month are superior to the last lot, we'd do better to keep our money in our pockets. It's useless to import poor stock—as useless as filling ourselves up with jail-scrapings from the Coast. At present we've got about four hundred fit slaves; the rest—sick or malingering."

Gabriel said quickly:

"If I can be of service, pray call on me. I could take charge of one of the hunting parties, if you wish."

"Many thanks; but you must not think that hunting *cimarrónes* is as simple here as it is in Barbados. There is not more than a hundredth part of the island that is cleared, and certainly more than a dozen *cimarrón* colonies have established themselves in the mountains. It's a pity someone does not organize a drive for the extermination of this rabble, but as it would take an army to do it thoroughly, I suppose they'll continue to make a nuisance of themselves." Santiago's fingers drummed the rhythm of his vexation on his stiffened thigh.

López spoke with affected hesitation.

"If the señor would permit——? It might be prudent, for a time, to send the señora and her infant into the town."

Santiago's jaw dropped. He had no idea matters had come to this pass, and he knew López was the last man on earth to exaggerate dangers.

"There are rumours of a plot to fire Buonaventura; if it goes so far, why should it stop short of the ranch-house?"

"A plot discovered is a plot outwitted. What nonsense are you talking? And what has come over our people?" He was outraged as a king is outraged by a rebellion among his subjects.

López shot him a sly look.

"The fires have started, señor. Fire starts in a man's brain and travels quickly—among straw. These cattle are straw; let one kindle the spark, and the straw starts smouldering."

"What caused the spark?" With the aptness of his race, Santiago caught the other's metaphor.

"Buonaventura is a great plantation. It could employ eight hundred slaves. We have five hundred, of whom, as I have told the señor, a fifth may be counted as lumber. The rest fear that when the harvests come there will be too much work for them."

"But when the harvests come we shall be buying more."

"If it is to our advantage." López lowered his eyelids. "I can get the work out of this lot, so long as I'm not hampered by runts, or forced to keep my eye on malefactors." He paused. "I know of a dozen it would pay us to get rid of."

"Then get rid of them!"

"The price of slaves, as the señor reminded me the other day, is rising."

Santiago scowled. He had spent the last forty-eight hours in going over accounts, and the conclusions to which he had come were not encouraging.

"Well, have you got the ringleaders?"

"Three have escaped; of whom one was that six-foot villain we bought in the summer. Two suspects have been hanged—but that, as the señor knows, is an expensive way of maintaining order. We should catch the runaways, for it seems they had neither food nor provision for travelling, so they'll keep in touch with their families until they've got enough to carry them to the mountains."

"What has my father to say to this?"

"He blesses fortune for a son who relieves him of responsibilities which, in his venerable age, he is unable to support!"

When they were alone, Santiago turned angrily to Gabriel.

"I wish to God I had never taken on this business. Besides my father and old Rodríguez at San Juan, what other gentleman in Cuba lives on his plantation? I yield to no one in my love for Buonaventura, but one can love a place without having its mud eternally clotted about one's heel."

"What shall you do about María Cayetuña?"

"Nothing. What do you expect me to do?"

"You do not take López seriously?"

"I take López seriously, and I take seriously the walls about my property. I would rather trust to them than to a wife left to her own devices in Havana. At any rate, we are safe while the rains last. There will be no burnings with

this to put them out, and by the time the dry weather comes, I shall be on my feet again."

"I was about to propose my departure," said Gabriel slowly. "I have already made greater claim on your hospitality than I intended on my arrival." Santiago looked aside. "But the way things are, I do not care to leave you—unless I should please you by going."

"Who is pleased at the departure of a guest?" inquired Santiago ambiguously. Gabriel deliberately ignored the ambiguity.

"López is there to look after Buonaventura, but there is no one in authority here, is there, on whom you can depend if your outdoor people catch the germ from their neighbours? I can use a gun, and I can keep my eye on things until you are about, if you'll authorize me to do it."

"You are very kind, *primo mio*."

"Think it over. And here, by the way, is a letter from your sister. I would have given it to you last night, but they told me you were asleep when I came in."

"My poor sister! I am sure she was glad of your company."

"The condesa was—most kind." So kind that Gabriel had left the Palacio Aroche feeling like a hunted hare; it was unlikely, he reflected, that she would press another invitation upon him.

"I advise you to profit by her liking for you to make acquaintance of some of the more formal, but none the less amusing, aspects of our society," Santiago recommended idly, while his fingers played with the seal of the letter. "You must ask her to take you to the Gamborenas; it is a house I know very well."

"So I gather." Gabriel's eyes twinkled, and, after gaping at the prompt retort, Santiago gave a graceless chuckle.

"Trust Isabela to spread scandal when she gets a chance. Well, you will meet a fine son of mine."

"Julio Gamborena? That explains it. I could not think at the time of whom he reminded me."

"Where did you meet him?"

"He was there, at the Aroche palace, yesterday afternoon. I thought he was a very striking youth, and, now you mention it, the image of yourself."

"An inconvenient likeness, I admit. It's lucky old Gamborena is too vain to acknowledge it. I wish to God María Cayetuña would give me such another."

"She may yet do so," Gabriel forced himself to reply.

Santiago shrugged his shoulders.

"She is too nervous, too sensitive. Say nothing to her about the slaves; it may disturb her. If things were otherwise, I would send her down to stay with my sister."

"I will leave you to read your letter," said Gabriel, rising.

She was crouched over the hearth, with the baby in her arms. A sudden light leapt to her eyes as he entered.

"Did you do it?"

"I left the note, as you told me, with the portress——"

"That would be Sister Caridad"—she nodded her head with a soft satisfaction of familiarity.

"She was very old and deaf, and curious to know who I was——"

"You did not tell her!"

"No; I made her understand that the letter was to be given at once to the Reverend Mother." He smiled at a formula of reference which she had taught him.

"God bless you!"

She was a little haggard, as though, during the last few weeks, the material world had drawn closer to her; she had lost some of that delicate, fabulous aloofness which he had loved in her. She had grown, since Santiago's illness, in some way more human, and he wanted to fold her back into her dream world, back into her enchanted sleep, for it seemed to him that such a one could never find happiness among the realities of living.

"How kind you are! Are you cold, too? I made them light this fire, because it is so wretched in the rooms downstairs, and the baby is not very well."

"What is the matter with it?" The smoke-dimmed atmosphere, in which the candles burned vaguely, the whisper of the rain, the sob of the wind, enclosed them in a sweet, rare intimacy that speech served but to disturb. He wanted now to stand beside her, saying nothing, to feel peace and confidence flowing from her to him, to watch the tender curve of her back and drooping head, the sweet, maternal arch of her body over the sleeping child.

For days the landscape had been blotted out by a watery screen, and the candles were sometimes lighted before breakfast and replenished throughout the day, as much for the illusion they gave of sunlight as for illumination. A thin film of humidity lay over all surfaces of wood and metal, the coverings of furniture and beds were damp, and it was useless to tune the guitar. Sometimes her fingers strove to coax a wistful chirrup from the relaxed strings, sometimes she strove to dispel melancholy by singing; but such efforts were sure to be interrupted by her cough—a short, soft bark that nobody but Gabriel noticed. When she had finished her duties in the sick-room, and Santiago was settled over the accounts with his overseer, it was Gabriel who made her sit beside the fire, and dared sometimes to take her little cold hands and rub warmth into them.

"Have you ever held a baby?" she asked him suddenly.

"No, I can't say I ever have."

"I want you to take her for a minute. Look, you must bend right down, she is too heavy for me to lift her. Now curve your arm round her, and put your hand under her little head. Very gently—be careful not to wake her."

A strange feeling came over him as he stood there with her child in his arms. She had risen, was bending her head over the baby, so that the shining brown hair almost touched his lips, was murmuring softly to give confidence to the child.

"There; she is quite quiet. Have I not said she trusts you? You aren't going away, are you?" she asked him anxiously, without lifting her head.

"Not until you want me to."

"Walk a little, so that she gets used to the feel of you."

She walked beside him; they seemed to be walking in a dream, in the silent house, with the rain spitting on the logs. The baby stirred and snuffled a little, but did not cry out.

"You must not go. I shall need your help."

"You know I am only here to help you."

She stiffened suddenly and held up a finger to hush him.

"Did you hear anything?"

"No; did you?"

"Has López gone?"

"He went about half an hour ago; I left Santiago reading a letter from his sister."

"*Madre mia*, you should have told me!"

Her deep glance reproached him as she turned to snatch the baby from his arms. For a moment their bodies were close together, his forearm pressed to the curve of her bosom. Obeying an irresistible impulse, Gabriel put his arms round both her and the child; she stood conscious, a little tremulous, looking up at him; their eyes met, and a look of overwhelming comprehension came into hers. It seemed as though it must last for ever—that deep, understanding regard; then, bending his head, Gabriel kissed—the child. It was the first lover's kiss María Pía ever received, and it was meant for another; as his lips brushed the baby's satin cheek, it was to him flesh of that dear flesh which, presently, he released, and walked across the room to open the door. As he did so they heard the voice of Santiago calling for his wife.

She passed him quickly, and the whispering of her gown went along the corridor like the breeze in a grove of oleanders. Leaning against the wall, Gabriel covered his face with his hands. For all his resolution, his secret was out; and he was left with so confused a sense of shame and relief that he was incapable of caring where or to what lengths the betrayal might lead him.

The hunt had started for the escaped slaves. It was drizzling, and the ground, much of it, was bog, that sucked at the horses' hoofs and made going slow; but it also made it easier to pick up the tracks of the runaways.

An odd, unpleasant hush lay on the stables when Gabriel went out to them. Then his quick ear caught a sound: a hollow belling that came faintly across upland and valley from the direction of the forests that extended their dark tentacles from the foot of the farthest hill. He could not at first identify the sound, which checked, then broke out again, eerie as a banshee's cry; then he knew. It was the bloodhounds, with which the Cubans hunted the escaped slaves. They seemed to be in full cry, and he had a hideous vision of human flesh, agonized and torn—probably in full view of the indifferent hunters, who would not interfere with the animals who did their work for them.

Even the head groom, Adan, had ceased this morning to be loquacious. The rest were huddled in the straw, out of which they dragged themselves, with wisps sticking ludicrously in their woolly polls, to stare silently, with unfathomable ophidian eyes, at Gabriel when he entered.

While saddling Gabriel's horse, Adan muttered, his eyes on the girths:

"*Muchos trabajos esta mañana.*"

Gabriel knew that the word *trabajos* might stand for trouble, as well as

work; knowing that Adan was a trusted servant, he lowered his voice to ask: "Why are the slaves running away from Buonaventura?"

"*No hay comidas*. Everybody hungry." The others were creeping nearer, they evidently knew well what was being said. "Pork sour, beans mouldy; much stomach-aches! No man can work on empty stomach. Too many floggings."

"But here things are all right?"

The man shot a wary glance from the corner of his eye.

"*Si, señor*. Here things are all right."

It was evident he was lying. Gabriel knew that the ranch slaves were well fed; he racked his brains to think of what was wrong. He abruptly told the man to unsaddle the horse, and walked out into the rain. At right angles to the stables ran the shed in which the night watchmen slept during the day-time. He went in; the place stank, but was empty. In fact, an extraordinary silence and emptiness lay over all the outbuildings. Could Santiago's men also have bolted? It was hard to believe, for he had always spoken well of his labourers. The men whose duty it was to watch the gates and patrol the walls at night were chosen in particular for their proven fidelity.

He came out of the shed to find all the grooms collected at the door of the stables, watching him silently, and, knowing from experience how useless it was to question negroes, he turned again towards the house. As he did so, two of the maids, whom he knew by name as Encarnación and Pepita, came quickly through the door with hoods over their heads; the nurse Rosario called after them, they turned and answered something, then hurried past Gabriel, with rosaries clasped in their hands, dropping him a quick obeisance as they went on their way.

It was left to Bat to contribute the final touch to his formless uneasiness.

"When does we go back home, Mars' Gabriel?" It was not the first time he had caught a note of wistfulness in Bat's voice, but this was the first time his faithful servitor had put his secret longing into words.

"I don't know. Have you had enough of Cuba?"

Bat shook his woolly head. Gabriel suddenly realized how dreary the man's life must be, among people with whom, although of their own race, he was only able to communicate by signs. Nor was it soothing to Bat's dignity to have to enter the house like a thief, with strict injunctions to make himself invisible if the mistress was about.

"Seems like Cuba ain't a good place for dark folk, Mars' Gabriel! Dey sho' is a bad lot of negroes on dese plantations, and Mars' Santiago—he sho' going to hab plenty trubble fo' long."

"Well . . . there's one thing about it: you'll be able to tell our folk how lucky they are, when we get home."

"I hope dat day will come soon. Maybe"—Bat's dark eyes met his master's solemnly—"maybe Cuba ain't good fo' white folk as well."

In Santiago's room Doña Vespasiana was saying:

"Now, is there not something I can do for you?" She set her head on one side and flirted her fan; she had a great admiration for her employer, who was *muy hombre*, and pitied him for having married a woman who made so much ado about having children.

"Open the windows; the room is as hot as an oven."

"Yet there's quite a lot of wind about. Ay, Don Santiago, the sooner you are well and about again the better!"

"Have you anything to tell me?"

"What can I have to tell you, who have missed a *pulmonia* only by inches?—who have only been out of my bed for the last couple of hours?" She coughed, patted her fat bosom, and ogled him reproachfully. "Even now, I risk my life for the sake of doing my duty!"

"What have you heard or seen?"

"Nothing—and everything!" She paused melodramatically, to puff out her breath and stiffen her thick, corseted body. "When people talk in French the words are nothing; it is the tone and the look which tells—no? But when they are silent there is no need to listen, and the mind is free to draw its own conclusions!"

He scowled at her, thrusting his hand beneath the pillow to take out a crumpled sheet of paper, evidently the last page of a letter. Her eyes went glinting to it with astonishment, with a kind of resentful jealousy: was she then forestalled?

"Read that; it will help to remind you of your duty."

She might have protested that she needed no reminders, but was too eager to satisfy her curiosity; she snatched the sheet and held it close to her short-sighted eyes, suppressing her annoyance that the writing should be that of the condesa de Coria—an inveterate trouble-maker, and always eager to point out to her brother the lapses of his household. Could a bedridden woman be expected to have her eyes and her ears everywhere?

"*Keep your eyes on your wife, my brother; for HE talks and thinks of nothing else.*"

"*Dios mio!*"

"What do you make of that?"

"I should lock her up until you have got rid of him!"

"And that would save you a lot of trouble, eh?" He snatched back the paper. "You know what you are here for. Send Sombra; I will get up."

III

It was said of the Abbess of Santa Clara that she had never been herself since that affair of the mulatto girl's elopement. Suddenly the stubborn flesh had crumbled, but with its crumbling had come an inflexibility of will that defeated all who would have striven to help her.

She who had not been seen about the convent for five years seemed everywhere—God knows how she did it: God, and the sweating women who supported her: who, helpless before her obstinacy, thrust the thick ebony sticks into either swollen hand and performed the miracle of getting her upstairs and down.

They said she was going simple; she would speak to a child, to a servant, with such humility that it shocked them; they shrank when her dim eyes sought in theirs for her own forgotten innocence.

"Why should you shrink from me, *chica*?" (The speech was so indistinct that only a few could distinguish the words that rolled unceasingly upon those

shapeless lips.) "What am I that you should fear me? I am less than the least of you—in the eyes of God I am of less value than that insect that hums over the flowers."

She would invite them to strike her, closing her eyes and holding out her face, and when they ran with terror from the fearful spectacle of her self-abasement, she would say to those who were with her:

"Who am I that I should aspire to share the sufferings of Our Lord?"

At a knocking on her door she would sign her companions to leave her.

"They have come to turn me out into the streets. I shall be taken through the town for them to throw stones at me. Blessed be the Holy Name of God that He sends this proof of His inapprehensible goodness upon His servant. Suffering is the greatest blessing of God, for it is the soul's ladder to redemption. Pray that you may suffer as I suffer. . . ."

She knew her case was being discussed at the other end of the island, and that the name of her successor was already whispered in the communities, and this, her public shame, was nothing to the eternal reproach of her soul.

As she tottered about the convent, making penance of the torment of her limbs, seeking her own lost good among those works which were the good of a young and ardent woman, eager to justify her appointment and vowed to the service of God and the care of His little ones, her memory slipped back to the days when, in desperation at the failure of all earthly hopes, she had dedicated the passion of her soul and body to Christ; had burned her way through her novitiate and subdued that inward burning to her vocation, until, sensing the energy that wasted beneath the habit of a religious, they made her Abbess of Santa Clara, which, within twelve months, under her skilful handling, leapt to life and took its place at the head of all such communities on the island. Even to Spain its fame had gone, and for the next decade or two she had had letters from all parts of the Christian world, her opinion was consulted, her advice sought in all matters of community organization.

In those days, she told herself, she had truly loved God. Even now, dimly, she recalled the bridal rapture of her initiation. "I love Thee now," her dry lips whispered: but what could such love avail—a love so tainted, so dishonoured, by her abuses of it?

Her convent, her school, her hospital, her orphanage; ceaselessly she had exercised herself to procure the vast sums of money that were needed for carrying out Santa Clara's many works of charity. She had been an unscrupulous intriguer, a dangerous enemy, a superb paralogist—always, she told herself, for the convent's good; and now, in the seventy-seventh year of her life, the most terrible thing that could happen had come upon her. She found herself, at an age when evasion may be pardoned, facing the truth.

All she had done was done, not for the love of God, as it was in the beginning, but for the sake of her own pride: done because no one else could do it: done to enhance her importance in the eyes of her superiors and to rouse the envy of those less courageous, or perhaps more scrupulous, than herself.

She had committed an outrage upon convent rule that would have brought about the disgrace of any one less powerful than herself, and had met her accusers with the promise to make such amends as took their breath away. In their acquiescence she had tasted the utmost sweets of victory, she had been drunk with it, she had felt more powerful than the Princes of the Church

whose condemnation she invited. Let them condemn in one breath; in the next they were obliged to condone. For no one had brought the Church such a gift as she was bringing it. She had done evil that good might come—but such good that would cancel out a dozen evils! Of that she had been confident, up to the last. . . .

And she was undone, by the power of human passion; by the need of young bodies to press limb to limb, by the thirst of young, desirous mouths.

She would stand in the hospital, or among the laundry women, and by her gestures participate in their actions; she was never conscious of the curious and often terrified glances she drew upon herself—standing there, with her face the colour of lead, and all the heavy flesh sagging upon the bones: so shrunk beneath her habit that the thick blue folds fell as though they were draped upon a scarecrow. All that was possible was done to keep the knowledge of her condition from the pupils, but she herself advertised it by her insistence upon resuming her old customs of visiting the dormitories and giving out the subject for meditation during the night.

“Meditate upon the love of God and the blessedness of human suffering.”

Some of the smaller children whimpered themselves into nightmares, and the convent was alive with gossip, while she trailed her new, dreadful humility from floor to floor, with a vacant smile on her lips. One day a little mongrel dog, one of the scores that ran between the garbage heaps and sometimes sneaked into the patio, made water upon her gown; when her attention was called to it, she stood, at first, dumb with ecstasy.

“I am become so low that the beasts no longer regard me. Even Our Lord was only spat upon by His enemies!” And then, realizing that, even in this, she boasted, she begged forgiveness of those that heard her, and went on with her terrible gestures of scouring a floor. These menial tasks which her body was too weak to perform she performed in spirit, and only the vague movements of her hands told the watchers what was in her mind.

She slept no more. But in her nights of physical suffering for which she would accept no alleviation, she found herself struggling, struggling, back to the Cross. Her worn-out brain had given in; she no longer tried to justify herself, even to herself; she saw herself as she was: the parasite that for thirty years had battered upon the cause to which it was dedicated. All her luxuries, her self-indulgences, rose in the darkness to confront her; their bloated bodies weighted hers in the night, she stifled beneath a vileness of velvet and strangled with intolerable wines. And, in the phases of her agony, she prepared her confessions.

They were frightful, those confessions; the priest who heard them felt sometimes that he was listening to a mad woman, and debated within himself his duty to speak to the bishop. Terrible outpourings of a broken and contrite heart, wailings of a lost soul, already self-condemned to its eternal damnation! They left her prostrate, and sometimes she had to be carried back to her apartments; for she no longer exacted her privilege of receiving the priest in the private chapel adjoining her parlour, but knelt in one of the narrow confessionals used by the pupils. There was nothing she would not do to humiliate herself. Unknown to her, however, the chapel doors were locked when the Abbess was with her confessor.

This, then, was her state when they brought her the letter from Maria

Cayetuña, and she read it twice before its message penetrated her fading brain.

“DEAR REVEREND MOTHER,

I know how deeply I have sinned, and what sorrow my sin has caused you. If I could I would tell you of the contrition in my heart, and of my gratitude for all you have done for me; but I am obliged to write this so hurriedly, and without the knowledge of anybody. For myself, after my ill conduct, I would ask nothing, but I have a little child now, a little girl, Reverend Mother; her name is María Pfa and I do want her to grow up a good Catholic. I have not been able to have her baptized, but I feel now I must wait no longer. Don Emiliano Guiote comes to hear our servants their confessions, but I never have a chance of speaking to him. Will you tell him that if he will baptize my baby I will find some way of getting her to him?—only I may not be able to let him know, so he would have to wait a little while after the confessions, and I will do what I can. Please do this, Reverend Mother, for the sake of my little girl; I would not ask it for myself. I am your humble daughter in Xt,

“María Cayetuña de Lorcha.”

It was an hour before she picked up her pen and wrote what was to be the last letter of her life. It was not to María Cayetuña, but on her behalf. It was to a person of discretion who owed her much, and even now, in the hour of her downfall, was to be trusted. She wrote it painfully; it occupied her for a long time. But at last it was signed and sealed. This much, at least, she could do for her Lord.

CHAPTER XI

I

THE rain had almost ceased for the last forty-eight hours and a livid sunset barred the western sky. All day long the atmosphere had been unbearably oppressive, and a halo encircled the sun which made a wafer in the colourless haze above the trees. Now the haze had withdrawn, bands of alternate chrome and violet striped the horizon, and above the trees hung the heavy smoke-stacks of purple cloud. In the wild cinnamons outside the window a cat-bird kept up its maddening imitation of a parrakeet, and all the frogs in the duck-pond popped up their bulbous heads and gave out the full-throated rattle of their tribe. The gusts of wind that from time to time stirred the air without freshening it sent the small, hard, green berries tapping against the *rejas* and puffed scent into the room.

"*Dios mio!* It feels like a hurricane, but we can't have hurricanes so late in the year as this?" panted Doña Vespasiana. As she received no answer, she stabbed, suddenly and maliciously: "You are very white these days, Doña María Cayetufía!"

"Can it be wondered at, with these changes of weather?"

Gabriel came in; he looked exhausted, and his hair was dark with sweat.

"Where is Santiago?"

"Is he not on the porch?" María Cayetufía lifted her head to stammer.

"I don't know—I came in the other way." Without another look or word he left them; Doña Vespasiana looked as disappointed as a cat snatched from its pan of cream.

"*Olà.* Sit down and rest yourself." Santiago indicated the refreshments at his elbow. "Well?" he inquired, as Gabriel reached forward thirstily to pour himself a glass of wine.

"López wants to send for the military," he blurted.

"The military! To deal with a handful of slaves?" Santiago laughed scornfully. "Old as he is, I'll wager Papa can equal half a dozen paid fighters when he gets a gun in his hand."

"That's what he says himself." Gabriel smiled ruefully; he had just had an hour of the old gentleman's heroics. "That's why López cannot act on his own authority; Don Pepe won't hear of a military guard. Santiago, I've just heard a most extraordinary thing; I don't know whether you will believe it."

"What's that?" These fools of foreigners, with their talk of "believing"! They invariably swallowed the lie and overlooked the obvious fact. Santiago turned a polite look of attention upon his guest.

"I stopped in the little tavern, after taking your message to Rodríguez: who, by the way, is ready to give you any help you may need. I overheard two men talking; they were saying that the trouble on your plantation is being fomented by the priests—at least, by their supporters. Is that at all likely?"

"Is anything more likely?" Santiago's face had flushed. "I have told

Papa over and over again that he allows the scoundrels too free a run about Buonaventura. They encourage the slaves to think they are ill-treated, and bait the trap of salvation with promises of food and improved conditions of living."

"I think"—Gabriel hesitated—"I think you should know that López has got half of them in chains, and he's cut down the rations to a starvation limit!"

"*Ca!* He knows what he's doing. The only way with niggers is to starve them out of their rebellions. Leave Buonaventura to López; what's going on here?"

"On the surface all is well. Your men seem to be doing their work—and I gave your order to start shoring up the bridges——"

"Well, then——!"

"I can't say what it is, but I feel uneasy. I suppose"—again he paused—"their sympathies are bound to be with their friends and relations at Buonaventura."

"Let them curb their sympathies, unless they expect Buonaventura treatment. On my wife's account, I've only employed picked men here; though none of them work indoors, they've enjoyed most of the privileges of household slaves. None of them had worked on the plantations in his life, and most of them were littered in our cabins. You can, by the way, execute one more commission for me. Tell the gatemen that the priest Guiote is not to be admitted again. I was obliged to make that concession to the servants, who believe they'll all burn in hell unless they make their regular confessions! But they must burn in future, or walk five miles to the church; I expect that will cool their ardour."

"I have something else to tell you. . . ."

Gabriel looked quickly round to see if any one else was within earshot, leaned forward, and spoke rapidly for several minutes; as he did so, with his eyes on Santiago's face, he did not miss the gradual hardening and withdrawal of the latter's expression, as though the real Santiago sank back into ambush, leaving a deputy to deal with a matter no less embarrassing to his guest than it was humiliating to him as host.

"A stone? You went out? Someone shot at you?" He shook his head gravely. "*Hombre*, you have certainly had the nightmare!"

"I can show you my stockings if you like," said Gabriel shortly. "They don't look like a nightmare." He tried to control his temper, which had risen at Santiago's incredulity. "You might at least inquire of your watchman why he was off duty last night."

"I certainly will."

The man, summoned, swore by every saint in the calendar that he had never left his post; Santiago spread his hands and hoisted his shoulders with a gesture of helplessness when he left them.

"Well, Cousin, if you choose to take the word of your servant against that of your guest——!"

"*Hombre!* The fellow will be flogged. I take it for granted before they speak that these fellows are liars. And as for yourself—is not the word of an Englishman like the tablets of stone? Let us say no more about it," said Santiago with magniloquence, "but, the climate being what it is at this time of year, I'd take a good dose of bark, if I were you, on going to bed."

Was Santiago's unbelief—so patent as almost to be an insult—his way of evidencing his horror as a host whose guest has suffered an outrage while under his roof? It was so that Gabriel, for his own peace of mind, determined for the present to take it—rejecting the darker implication which, as his intelligence warned him, was the truer one. He had, after all, other things to trouble him.

Between then and the dawn came a torrential downpour of rain, but the morning, when it came, was no cooler. Early awake, Gabriel heard a harsh screaming overhead, and a flock of parrots went by, yellow necks outstretched, scarlet breasts and underwings aflame across the grey-white sky that seemed to flatten the tops of the trees along the avenue. Over the pastures the crows were restlessly wheeling and flapping, as though striving to shake off the heaviness that oppressed their wings.

While he loitered on the porch, wondering how a new day could bring with it such staleness, such lifelessness of atmosphere, María Cayetúña joined him in her muslin wrapper, a veil of gauze flung over her head and knotted under her chin. There were marks like bruises under her eyes, and her cheeks seemed to have hollowed in the night. It was too early for Doña Vespasiana to be abroad, and he thrilled at the rare delight of seeing her alone.

"We have had such a bad night." Her teeth were chattering between the bluish line of her lips, as though with cold, but he guessed it was exhaustion. "I hardly slept; Santiago was so restless, and kept crying out in his sleep and catching hold of me. And the wound in his shoulder is burning, and he tosses his head on his pillow, just as he did at the beginning of his illness."

"I am going to the town to see about my passage; shall I send the doctor?" He had taken her trembling hands and was holding them, to warm them, between his own. That she should be cold, in such oppressive heat, was fantastic.

"You are really going back to Barbados?"

"I think he will soon be fit to look after things, and it is better I should make my plans for going."

"Of course—you must know what is best," she answered, with a heart-rending docility.

"If I stay on, it will only lead to trouble. And what have we to gain, you and I"—he could not control the bitterness in his voice—"by making Santiago unhappy?"

She looked at him as though she besought him to understand, to impose no further test upon her.

"God would not forgive us, if we made Santiago unhappy."

"Does God, then, demand the sacrifice of all our own happiness?" he could not refrain from asking.

"What happiness could there be, if——?"

"You know how it is with me." He paused.

She, too, waited, before saying:

"I have so much to thank you for!"

"Not that—for God's sake!"

"Would you have me ungrateful? Gratitude"—she smiled a little—"is such a blessed virtue!"

"Who wants gratitude, in my place?" He drew a deep breath. "I shall love you—till I die."

She shivered.

"Don't let's talk of death. It's—it's unlucky. Besides, you must come back! You will have to come back, because of María Pía! You have to tell her all those things—about Bristol—*Bristol*," she corrected herself, "and the Floods—that you have told me. And you must help to look after her, until she is old enough to look after herself."

"How can I do that, while Santiago thinks of me as he does?"

"I can arrange that after you are gone." She spoke with a curious confidence. "All Cubans are jealous, you know, but I know he loves me, and when you are not here I shall soon be able to persuade him that there was nothing for him to trouble about."

"In fact," he said—cruelly, because his love for her was burning him—"my departure will be as much of a relief to you as it is to Santiago."

"That is unkind, and it is not true." He heard her voice quiver; her hands, which she had snatched from his, were pressed to her bosom. She was white and her eyes were closed, as though she dreaded what they might betray.

"Have you the courage to answer truly, when I ask you if you love me?"

"You are asking me if I have the courage to sin," she said faintly. "That—to me! who have sinned so much."

"It cannot be sin, my darling, to tell the truth. I would not have you sin, nor would I sin myself, though all earth's happiness hung upon it. All I may ever be or do, in years to come, belongs to you, and you only."

It was difficult to steady his voice; the sorrow of unconsummated love lay on him like a cloud. Henceforth he would go through life like a man dreaming, no living being could hold significance for him again; knowing it, he made his act of resignation, but he could not refrain from begging some drop of comfort.

"I have given you all, my dear love; have you nothing to give me?"

As though realizing the futility of words, she laid her hands in his, and the tears which had gathered in her eyes while he was speaking trembled on the long lashes, to fall in heavy drops down her tired cheeks.

How, he wondered, had he ever shrunk and shuddered from her? She was all his life. He accepted, in that moment, all her evil with all her good. He no longer sought explanation for, or tried to excuse, that scene in the factory, which he had at last, after much torment, thrust so far into the back of his mind that it had lost its reality. He knew that even had she been deliberately responsible for that hideous scene, by now he would have *had* to love her. She was the fulfilment of his every dream and desire, she was a creature, perhaps, under an evil spell; and her victimization, her helplessness, only made him love her the more.

At the sound of horses' hoofs they separated quickly, and Gabriel went down on the drive to meet four of Santiago's friends, who had ridden over to see if they could be of use in the rumoured trouble at Buonaventura.

II

On the following day the sky at midday was of a clear, staring blue, rivalling summer's heat. It drew people out of doors, revived spirits depressed
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by the long rains and sent idle groups loitering from hill to hill, to gaze into the valleys which now thundered with their torrents of water. There were lakes where no lakes had been, there were great stacks of driftwood torn from the levees, there were trees whose roots had been sapped, and which had fallen in all their prime, crashing into the floods.

The children ran about, collecting *cocujos* in bottles—the luminous beetles of which two or three give out enough light to make a lantern on the darkest night; their fat, grey bodies, sun-stupefied, were easily captured on the low branches of trees whose trunks were submerged in water, and anxious parents screamed to their offspring to keep away from the brushwood, for in flood time the snakes seek higher ground and even invade the houses.

One of the gardeners was bitten by a *juba*, and died in great fear and agony before they could get the priest to him. Don Emiliano Guiote, praising God for the sunshine, arrived at the gates of the Villa María-Cayetuña and was turned away. He went thoughtfully, fingering a letter which lay in his pocket.

For all the sunshine, however, the wiser members of the community kept close to their houses, and when scorned for their timidity, pointed to the small, dark clouds, rounded and heavy as woolly cannon-balls, that showed from time to time on the horizon. María Cayetuña also watched them, and dug her nails into the tender palms of her hands. For to-day was the day named by Don Emiliano for the baby's christening, and nothing would prove more fatal to her plans than one of the autumn storms for which the island was notable.

Santiago watched them, and forgot, for the while, to watch his wife. He had been carried on to the porch, and his eyes never left the sky, his uneasiness increasing as the small clouds collected into a black mass that was the more ominous for the clear blue overhead. All the anxiety and mistrust of the planter quickened his unrest and his lack of confidence in those whose duty it was to safeguard his property. Had the boiling houses been frapped down with the great, stone-weighted cables that he had himself had installed: and had been the only planter in the neighbourhood to save his boiling plant at the time of the last hurricanes? Were the wagons under cover and the storage sheds buttressed? What about Buonaventura? Had proper precautions been taken for the safety of an old, feeble man?

And the cattle? A groan broke from Santiago's lips as he thought about his ranch.

By about two o'clock the clouds had joined together into a black pillar that rose the full height of the sky's arch and spread slowly along the horizon. The meal they had brought him lay untouched at Santiago's side. Above him where he sat he could hear a clapping of shutters—the servants closing the windows of the upper storey; people kept coming out on the porch and on the drive below to look at the weather, there was an excited restlessness in the house behind him. He saw two maids set out on some errand with frightened looks at the sky, where the solid pillar of cloud stood dark against the thin flying scud that raced behind it.

A bell rang so suddenly through the house that some of the women gave a scream. María Cayetuña, trimming with lace a coverlet for the baby's cot, dropped her needle and ran out into the hall, Doña Vespasiana shuffling after

her. Neither of them knew where Gabriel was; they had not seen him all day.

"What was that bell?"

It was Santiago's voice that answered—but not from the corner where they had left him. By some inhuman means the distracted man had dragged himself in his chair along the porch, to where he could pull on the chain of the door bell; his face was livid, his hands trembling with the effort.

"Send Adán—I want a horse!"

"A horse? But——"

"A horse! *Madre de dios*, have I to repeat it?"

"*Dios mio! Señor——*"

"Santiago—you can't mean—my dear, my love!" She clung to him, indifferent to the servants, whose alarmed faces crowded the doorway. "Santiago, you can't ride in the state you're in. What is it? What message can we send for you?"

He thrust her aside, speaking across her head to the outdoor man who, hearing the commotion on the porch, came running to see what was the matter with his master. In another moment he was running in the opposite direction, towards the stables, calling for the head groom, while Sombra bound strips of leather, at his master's command, over the bandages that covered his legs. There was no question of getting boots on; Santiago winced and, without knowing it, groaned as the top of the cloud pillar began slowly to curl earthward and its thickened base to advance imperceptibly across the jagged hills. It was a race against Nature herself, and the panting men who helped him knew it.

It took three of them—he had grown very heavy since his illness—to get him into the saddle, and his face was green with pain; the blood spurted along his lower lip, where his teeth ground into it, and streaked his chin. The women looked at him with horror, clinging together and trembling, but not daring to speak; only his wife ran to the horse's side, and laid a kiss upon the naked hand that felt mechanically for the girths. He gave her a blind look, then swung the horse about and set off at a gallop towards the gates. At a sign from María Cayetúña, the groom, who had brought a second horse unbidden, followed him.

It was, to begin with, a sheer fight against pain; Santiago clung to consciousness, as his reduced muscles clung to the barrel of the animal. From below the knee his legs were practically useless, and were unable to spare him the jarring of the spine, which, riding as Spaniards do, with the long stirrup, was inevitable. For the first time in his life he had no sense of unity with his horse; with his head swimming and one arm useless, he was obliged to cling to the pommel with his free right arm that held the reins to prevent himself from falling.

As he topped the first low range, he saw what he had expected to see: the herd stampeding. They travelled across the savanna like a swarm of flies, driven by their terror of the oncoming storm. But his cattlemen were there; as his sight, blinded by sweat and pain, cleared, as he willed himself to see, he could make out the figures on horseback, racing to outstrip the herd. It had grown so suddenly, ominously still that he could actually hear, even from that great distance, the muffled thunder of the hoofs; he could see, as he watched,

the *ganaderos* gaining ground, the splattering disorder in the ranks, as the herd wheeled, some of them falling, rolling, to be gored by their frantic companions. And he waited long enough to see the mad race flagging, and the cattle moving uncertainly in the right direction, towards that high cup in the hills that was their safest refuge, before he set off at a right angle towards Buonaventura.

There was an almost terrible contrast between the stillness of the earth and the frenzy of the sky. The canebrake stood fossilized, its constant whispering silenced, its tall, sprouting shafts resembling the complicated grilles of bronze that are seen in cathedrals; the sick light drained the colour from the leaves, which hung as though weighted with plummets of lead. Out on the path the yellow-grey coils of a *maja* snake lay straightened, as in death, and the horse, shying from the thick, scaly rope, thicker than a man's arm, nearly unseated his rider. But overhead the flying scud rushed madly to join the cloud column, which had lost its immobility, and curled upon itself and into itself in an eternal torment.

The frightened slaves, driven by their negro overseers, rushed to secure the factory plant; some, crawling upon the roofs, hoisted heavy stones to hold down the coverings, others slammed doors and dropped the great wooden bars into their slots, while a string of mules, brought up from their pasture, clattered into the stables, which were already crowded with women and children who had fled from their bohios to the comparative safety of stone-built shelters. The air was full of panic and disaster, of senseless, childlike lamentation.

The appearance of Santiago caused a sensation, and for a moment quelled the tumult, as he rode at the gallop through the factory yard and turned towards the avenue leading to the house. A stream of women, most of them with children in their arms, or clutching their household pots and pans, went with him; crowded out of the factory, they were making for the solid out-buildings that surrounded Buonaventura; making for the Old One, who, whether dead or living, would surely protect them from the evil spirits of the storm.

And as they went, a sound grew behind them: a thin wail that strengthened to a scream. With shrieks for mercy, some of the slaves flung themselves face downwards on the earth; at the same moment, the long, pliant leaves of the palms flew out like pennants, the tender plantains split into shreds, and along the avenue the thick trunks of the ancient trees swung earthward with a cracking groan.

He saw a child blown flat on its face, and he felt his horse stagger as the branches cut across its head and drew blood both from it and its rider. Lying on its neck, he dug in the spurs they had managed to fasten to his heels and drove the terrified beast at the thicket which, a few seconds before, had been a high, arching tunnel. As the boughs flew upward he felt his cheek torn open, and was partly lifted from the saddle; but beyond were the ceibas, whose solid branches, draped with their aerophytic growths, would resist any tempest known to man. The sacred trees, in which the Virgin herself sought refuge, when pursued by her enemies. The old superstition came back to his mind, so contemptuous of superstitions, as he pressed on in growing darkness, the howling of the slaves behind him mingling with the howling of the wind.

With a crash that seemed to be immediately overhead, the waters broke, and all the tree-trunks danced in the blue flicker of lightning. At the end of the tunnel of ceibas he could see the outbuildings through the slithering rods of rain, and as he checked for a moment, waiting for the next rush of the wind to pass, there came a faint, tearing sound that was deadened by the scream of the wind and the thunder of the slanting rain; and something, some incredible bird that spread itself across the sky and made darkness darker, swooped through the air and settled on the tops of the ceibas. As fragments came clattering through to drop at his feet, Santiago recognized them. It was the roof of Buonaventura.

III

Three hours later a ghost rode up to the ranch-house. In three hours—the autumn storms were mercifully brief—broad acres of cane had been ripped out by the roots, whirled through the air and deposited for miles across the countryside. A harvest was lost. An old, historic mansion had become a gutter for the torrents that still poured through it, sapping its foundations.

An army of household slaves, resilient as all their kind when danger is past, were cheerfully baling out water and shovelling mud, singing in the sun that blazed across the ruined scene. Two boiling houses were a pile of scattered bricks. The village was a heap of poles, over which the women scrambled, seeking their belongings. Every unoccupied adult and child was pressed into the recovery of factory utensils which had been hurled far and wide across the fields and pastures. Yet, as Cuba went, it was "not a bad storm." Only a couple of lives were lost—a foolish negro who had taken shelter beneath the roof of the grinding mill and had been caught by the collapse of the cylinders, and a child who was trodden into the mud in the stampede up the avenue.

So the women sang while the men were silent, sensing the reign of terror ahead of them, until the damage of the storm was repaired. Already the whips cracked, the hum of organization was in the air. They would have liked to build their fires, sit down and eat, and recover a little from the terror of the past hours, but no such things were taken into account on Buonaventura. But there was sullen hatred in many hearts, and enforced submission covered a restlessness of which the watchful overseers were well aware.

Santiago was older—he knew it—for those hours. He had passed through the extremities of pain, of moral and physical stress, when he had no reserves with which to meet either. And he was probably a ruined man. The loss of the season's crops would about put finis to Buonaventura, and his profits on the ranch would be swallowed up in repairing the irreparable. He cursed Buonaventura, while his heart wept over it; and most of all he cursed the obstinacy of an old man who refused to admit when he was beaten.

His eye took account of the damage the storm had done to his own property; nothing much so far. The water had sapped part of the foundations of the wall, in which a wide breach gave him a view of the house and outbuildings, which, apparently, had not suffered. It was barely twelve months since he had completed the rebuilding, and the one-time shack was a solid, comfortable dwelling. It had even a certain dignity, a miniature beauty, with

its pillared lower story, and the long line of shutters that shaded the upper rooms. Now, with the sunset gilding its façade, it rose triumphant from its grassy mound, from the litter of broken branches with which it was surrounded. A tree was down, here and there, and the flowering shrubs that he had planted round the carriage sweep were uprooted, and carried across the lawn and pastures, to heap against the walls themselves.

The weary horse toiled up the drive; its ankles were knotted about with the cupey and matapalo the storm had dragged from the ceibas, its sides dark with rain and sweat. Santiago's sodden clothes were plastered to his ribs, and the soaked leather of his breeches chafed sores in his tender, bedridden flesh.

They had to carry him into the house, and at first he was too faint and sick to realize the fright and apprehension around him, and lay limp while they stripped him and rubbed salve upon his sores. It was only when he had drunk the fiery alcohol they held to his lips that he realized his wife was not there.

"Where is she? Where's your mistress?"

There was an instant gabble, a rolling of frightened eyeballs. Presently it appeared that she had been seen, just before the storm broke, going down towards the laundries.

"Alone?"

"No, *señor!* Don Gabrielo—he was with her."

A cold dart went through Santiago's bosom.

"Were they by themselves?"

There was a pause before one of the women answered:

"No, *señor!* Don Gabrielo—he was carrying the baby!"

His wife—and his child. Was this madness? He felt his brain turn to an aching fire. Now that the tale was partly told, a dozen voices strove together to amplify it.

Encarnación and Pepita, who had been out—they did not say where—had met them on their way; they had come home early, because of the storm. Besides, it was Rosario's feast day, and she had gone home, and Pepita had promised to mind the baby. They had spoken to the señora, who paid no heed to their warnings. They had hurried on to the house, to tell Doña Vespasiana, who was half silly with the draught she had taken to calm her nerves. And then, before they could do anything, the storm burst, and they all crouched together in the cellars, wondering if the house were to be blown away. Doña Vespasiana was still there, locked in one of the cellars; she seemed to have gone out of her mind.

"But, *madre mía*, has no one been to the laundry?"

"As soon as the rain stopped, Pedro went down, with Tomás and Andrés: but the house is still there, and the bridge has been blown away!"

The laundry stood on the farther side of the deep stream that watered Buonaventura and the ranch-house, in which the maids washed the linen and pounded it with stones, afterwards laying it to dry on the shaly banks. To reach the laundry itself, where the clothes were starched and ironed, it was necessary to cross a small, wooden bridge—except during the dry season, when the stream ran so low that it was easy to wade from bank to bank. This stream was now—Santiago knew, without seeing it—a raging torrent, a curdling sheet

of dark-brown water, flooding the near pasture and rising to within all but a foot or two of the laundry building, which, in the worst weather, was flooded as well.

"Did they see nobody?"

"*Si, señor!* Don Gabrielo was there, on the farther bank, and he made signs they would go down to the stone bridge and come home that way."

The stone bridge; that was nearly two miles upstream, and, as the path wound, at least four miles from the house. Four miles of liquid mud, and a child to carry, and María Cayetúña in her house-gown. Within twenty-four hours the tale would be all over the island, they would have it down in Havana—de Lorcha's wife and his guest, traipsing like vagabonds through the mud, and carrying a baby!

The obvious thing was to send horses; yet who could be expected to aid a treacherous wife and her lover in their escapade? So that was what they had intended to do: to go down to the laundry to make love. Their desire had risen to such a pitch that even the threat of hurricane did not prevent them; they had probably counted on it to cover their tracks. And he had gone to look after Buonaventura! How much better had he stayed, as Isabela had warned him, to look after his wife.

And the baby! What in God's name was the baby doing in it? If the nurse had gone out, there were half a dozen women to look after it—allowing for the two wenches who—he knew it without being told, but reserved his recriminations—had gone priest-visiting. . . .

An hour had gone past, and he sat where they had left him, in a dark corner of the hall: a corner from which it was easy to cover the two figures which, presently, would enter by the door. At least half a dozen times he had lifted the pistol which lay across his knees and levelled it at the square of daylight, observing carefully the steadiness of his wrist—before it struck him that he could not afford to kill either of them.

It was dark, and they were lighting the candles in the rooms—always avoiding the darkness in which their master sat. There was a hush of apprehension on all the house, broken only by the moans of Doña Vespasiana from the cellar, in which, by Santiago's orders, she was still confined. It was awful for that self-indulgent old woman down there in the dark, which she always hated, which now was peopled in her terrified imagination with all the horrors of scorpions and the poisonous, hairy spiders whose bite is certain death; and she was quite certain that she was to be left there to die of starvation, if the spiders did not get her. So she moaned and sobbed, and prayed at the top of her voice, which grew hoarser and hoarser, and thought of her *pulmonía* which so nearly killed her every winter—and better a thousand times to die of constriction in the chest than slowly to perish beneath the feet of the master she had betrayed!

The Cruz de María glimmered into the green-blue dusk, gaining in brightness as the darkness deepened, until it blazed upon a sapphire-deep sky, and fireflies spangled the grass and the few remaining shrubs—before there was a low sound of voices, and footsteps that dragged on the gravel. Then, in the star-scattered square of the doorway, appeared Gabriel, with María Cayetúña in his arms.

Santiago watched them, hugging his concealment, while they turned

towards the parlour, and as the light fell upon their two worn faces, he felt with satisfaction that the punishment for their treachery had begun. Neither spoke; Gabriel supported himself for a moment, leaning against the door-post, before exerting the last of his strength to carry María Cayetuña into the room and lay her upon her couch. One of the outdoor workers stumbled across the threshold, carrying the baby, which gave out a pitiful, hungry wail.

They were not in his line of sight, but Santiago could imagine how they started, as he clapped his hands and cried out for lights. There were servants with candelabra at one door, Gabriel white as a ghost at the other, and María Cayetuña, who had sprung from her couch at the sound, wavering behind him, with hands outflung, seeking the support which was not there.

As the lights were set down he saw the piteous state of the pair of them—Gabriel shoeless, with mud plastered above the knees of his breeches, she with her gown in mud-caked ribbons from the knees, the *velo* bandaged beneath her chin and knotted on top of her head, to protect the chestnut coils which now seemed to him symbolic of her utter falseness.

After that first stricken look, when her mouth made a dark gash in her colourless face, she pushed Gabriel aside and came to kneel at her husband's feet, resting her head on his knee. It seemed like the end of her strength, he felt her sag, thrust his sound arm down roughly to catch her. No word was spoken by any. For Gabriel, there was nothing to be said, he was past saying anything, and Santiago's tongue was dry in his mouth, as his fingers bit into the soft, soaked material that covered her resistless body.

It was María Pía's indignant protest against this inattention to her inmost needs that broke the unendurable silence. An angry howl tore itself from her little throat, and María Cayetuña turned on her knees, holding out her arms for her daughter.

"Forgive us—forgive your little child!" She laid her arms with the baby in them across his knees, looking up at him with such unfathomable innocence in her eyes that he shrank from this all too patent proof of her duplicity. "And forgive me most of all, Santiago! I have had her baptized."

IV

This was the kind of talk that went round the *estancias*:

"They're badly hit at Buonaventura."

"Yes, indeed, Santiago's playing a losing game."

"It's the Old One's fault. It doesn't do to be satisfied with past success; we live in an age of competition!"

"It's true, isn't it, he never applied for the bounties?"

"Called it charity and threw it back in their faces. *Si, señor!* To all intents and purposes the Old One's still living at the beginning of the century, when contraband put a nice, snug lining in his pockets, and planting was a hobby. Buonaventura was a fine plantation—once."

"They say the house has fallen in."

"God's got tired of looking after the de Lorchas."

"Maybe He's annoyed with Santiago."

"More likely Santiago's annoyed with himself."

"What have you heard?"

"That he's taken to locking the stable door—after the mare has gone."

"He'd do better to lock his bohios. They say he's lost twenty—thirty—forty slaves."

"Wife's cheaper than prime nigger; you can't afford to lose slaves like that these days."

"There's too many loose niggers about the country."

"What about the English money that was to raise an army and make Santiago king of the island?"

This was greeted with a guffaw.

"Well, isn't that what his wife's cousin came about?"

"Maybe that's why Santiago lets him take liberties with his wife."

So ran the uninformed, trivially malicious conversations on the farms and in taverns; occasionally a soberer voice was raised, to protest the traditional greatness of de Lorcha; but the younger generation was not impressed by tradition. Santiago had never been popular with his *montero* neighbours; he "gave himself airs"—which meant he associated too much with the gentry; he supervised too strictly for a man in his position the minor expenditures of the plantation, so that the provisioners failed to make what they considered their legitimate rake-off; he employed agents, only, it appeared, to do the work himself. So there was a faction which made no concealment of its gratification when, despite all his efforts, Buonaventura was going down. It was also an open secret that his profits on the ranch were diverted to the maintenance of the older property; and now that the tale of de Lorcha's wife had gone like wind from end to end of the country, it pleased them to snigger at the misfortunes of one whose superiority had galled them in the past.

Yet another sensation was occupying the gossips. On the morning after the storm, the condesa de Coria had driven out from Havana. For the first time in the history of the new ranch-house, the great de Coria coach, with its emblazoned panels, and its four fat horses puffing and steaming up to the clear blue sky, had rolled through the gateway, right up to the door.

The two women met and curtsied formally to each other in the hall.

"I hope I am not unwelcome, *cuñada mía*," Isabela spoke boldly. (The mulatress was losing her looks; so much the better for her—Isabela's—schemes.) "But these are not times for observing old and foolish conventions. I should like to speak to my brother."

Her overdress was of yellow, with broad stripes of magenta satin: the petticoat loaded with vermilion embroideries on a ground of royal blue, and the mantilla was held in its position by diamond pins. She might have been going to a reception at the Residency, instead of driving out to pay a country call. María Cayetúña, in her morning wrapper, thought she looked vulgar; surely such display was not in good taste, even in Havana?

"My husband is in bed; allow me to take you to his room."

"I hear he has been behaving like a madman," observed the condesa, as her stiff silks rustled up the stairs. "Whoever heard of a man in his condition riding to Buonaventura in yesterday's weather? I am surprised at you for permitting it!"

"I do not 'permit' my husband's actions, señora"—she smiled faintly—"nor do I interfere with his duties."

Isabela lifted her lorgnette together with her eyebrows. The mulatress was getting above herself, evidently.

"Then it's just as well you have a taste for nursing! Yesterday's exploit would have killed any one but a de Lorcha!"

María Cayetuña silently opened the door into the room where Santiago lay, sick and angry, thinking about his ruined crops; and as Isabela swept in, parrot-bright in her satins, scattering the strong perfume which was the true expression of her exuberant personality, she quietly closed the door again behind her, and leaned for a moment against the wall of the passage, her hand pressed to her beating heart.

Now, between them, they would ruin her! Santiago would tell Isabela all the events of the previous day, and Isabela would take pains to make him see the facts in their most vicious light. Together they would slay her happiness, and make an end of all that had been beautiful in the years of her marriage. If only she did not feel so faint and ill, and were capable of going in and confronting them, of nailing the lies to Isabela's false mouth! For nothing could have brought her here but the instinct to make trouble.

"So your guest is leaving you?" Isabela was saying, after greetings. Santiago lowered at her, with narrow, red-rimmed lids.

"Who told you that?"

"I met him on my way here—and I don't think he was much pleased by the encounter."

She had met Gabriel on the hill, and had bidden him imperiously to give his horse to one of her grooms and ride with her in the coach for company: which invitation Gabriel had refused, and the condesa, as we have seen, did not forgive refusals. She still found him teasingly attractive, with that clear, almost girlish skin: it was a little pale this morning, and there were faint, purple streaks under his eyes—perhaps the aftermath of a sleepless night, of dreaming about María Cayetuña? Her jaw stiffened; yes, she owed the mulatress something, first for stealing her brother, and now for capturing one on whom Isabela's vagrant fancy had lighted.

"Full of evasions," she went on, "and not at all anxious to meet my eye. Did you pay attention to my warning?"

He told her briefly of what had occurred the night before. Here the condesa's brows rose into dark crescents as he ended.

"Well, what do you think?" he persisted, as she was silent.

"You have not asked me for my thoughts lately, *hermano mio*," she reproached him.

"That is true," he admitted. "But I ask you now."

She looked sidelong at the man beside her. She saw he had aged greatly, and that he was labouring under a painful emotion that he strove to repress; but the strained jaw, the deep lines that ran from the flanges of the nostrils to the corners of his mouth told her much. He was at her mercy, but she must go delicately, if she wanted her vengeance, and his.

"Whether he was her lover or not, only God can decide."

"The woman who slept with me last night had been had by her lover. You ask me how I know? If you love a woman as I have loved María Cayetuña, you know if another man has touched her hand. They made the baptism

their pretext—may they rot in hell for it. They use my enemy against me——!" He became inarticulate in his agony.

"As for the baptism," said Isabela briskly, "I am not so sorry about that; it is a step in the right direction. You know you will have, sooner or later, to climb down from the position you have taken up towards the Church. When Papa is dead it will not pay you to keep up this enmity, which harms nobody but yourself."

He brushed the subject aside.

"What do those things matter? I would not have the child baptized, because to do so was to turn tail on my own convictions. Now it is done, and there is no undoing it. I make as little of that as I do of other superstitions. But that which it covers——! For that, as you know, there can be but one return."

"If the matter is kept secret——"

"What is kept secret in Cuba?" he sneered. "Before I reached home the place was babbling with it. I was marked down as a cuckold before my own servants."

"I should have thought you knew how to deal with that."

He looked cunningly to see whether her meaning was his, before replying.

"I know, my dear sister, and I can deal . . . but we can't afford to have trouble with that family, and there is not so much time left."

"Why not let him go, and leave it at that?" She had rustled to the window, and, elaborately careless, lifted her fan to point to a string of horsemen who were crossing the distant fields. "Where are those people going?"

"Would you leave it at that?" he mocked her. "They are going to look for slaves; three more are missing this morning; the wet weather has left them with too much time on their hands, and now, at the prospect of hard work, they are quitting as fast as they can go. It is just as fortune has it that the water broke into the kennels last night, and most of the dogs are drowned; the two bitches are in whelp, and would likely litter before they reached the woods. You see how, when once it begins, all goes against a man."

"*Qué disparate!* You know that this makes you fight, as it makes me!" She faced him splendidly. It was thus, when they were both children, and Santiago had been discouraged about some trivial matter, she had driven heart into him. He had loved her for it then; she felt his love swinging towards her now. They knew each other, as none else knew them; knew each other's weakness and strength, heat and coldness. They were moved by the same things, the same things revolted them; what affronted the one affronted the other. She had but to hint to Santiago that Gabriel had insulted her to range his vengeance on her side. Or would it be better—her quick brain ran on—to make out that the advances were Gabriel's? She had known him always jealous of her lovers, and had even allowed her vicious imagination to play with the idea of pushing their relationship past its normal limits into those wilds of perversion it amused her to contemplate. After all, why not? The ancient Egyptians had done it—sons had taken mothers as their mistresses, brothers their sisters.

At any rate, she had a card up her sleeve which it would be well, for the present, to reserve. She wanted for the moment less to avenge her private grudge against Gabriel than to punish María Cayetuña. She knew how Santiago's pride was stung at the thought of his betrayal forming a subject of

gossip all over the island. For the cuckolded husband there was but one way of regaining face among his companions, and that way—she agreed with Santiago—was forbidden to him.

"You ought to get another overseer; López is not hard enough with them," she answered, to his final complaint.

"Leave me to look after my own business," he cried desperately. "It is the other thing that destroys me; what am I to do with it?" Her hand gripped his quickly in answer to the appeal, and all of her possessive love surged towards this brother whose weakness had brought him back, at last, to her side. "I am ruined unless the money comes from England. If I kill her, I have lost her and I have lost the money; if I kill him, it will surely create suspicion, and lead, perhaps, to further delay in the settlement of the estate. I have tried it once already," he dragged her closer to whisper. "After I had your letter. I had arranged it in such a way that it could hardly have been traced back to me . . . but it failed. It has seemed imprudent to try again."

"You must indulge in no folly," she told him firmly. "There is yet some time before his ship sails; many things may happen before then."

CHAPTER XII

I

NEVER in his pleasant and inoffensive life had Gabriel been surrounded as he felt himself now by an atmosphere of intrigue and violence; he had in the past few weeks developed such a hatred of the false Cuban smiles as he had conceived himself incapable of feeling. He who had come bearing the dove of peace felt sometimes the dagger of the assassin trembling between his shoulder-blades. Yet what had they to gain by destroying him, who had come to be of service to them all? He had seen the originals of the documents relating to his cousin's marriage, and had written to Barbados his conviction of the authenticity of them all. He had done more; for he had urged on Thomas and Henry the consideration of some compromise: some division of the estate which would give Santiago immediate use of his wife's money. "It is surely better that way than that the whole fortune should seep away into the pockets of lawyers, as it is now doing!" And he had taken pains to emphasize the character and dignity of their Cuban relatives, and to disabuse the minds of his brothers and sisters of their scornful conception of their cousin as a "common mulatress," and to describe the importance of de Lorcha in the island.

"May God smite me," Don Pepe was saying violently to his overseer, "if I need soldiers to help me govern my slaves!"

López shrugged and chewed his thumbnail; the *monteros* and Gabriel avoided his eyes. López knew what he was doing; the drafting in of military would certainly prevent attempts at rebellion, since the negro is easily overawed by a show of arms: whereas a sudden outbreak could only end in an expensive shooting. Torn from his tobacco and spirits by the tardy recognition that all was not well with his plantation, the Old One had come suddenly to life—which was something; but his fury at the proposed measures for defending his property brought little reassurance to his adjutant.

"How many have you got in jail?"

López grunted a number.

"For what offences?"

"Theft—of food, mainly; in three or four cases, for attacks on head men."

"It's not so good for López," one of the *monteros* was muttering to Gabriel. "He has his house, and his wife and daughters to think about."

"They had an attack last week at Pascuale's."

"*Cimarrónes!*" The old man spat out the word. "Neither I nor my father nor my grandfather were ever troubled by that gentry! Nor would the rest of you be, if you dealt with them in the proper fashion. I remember my grandfather telling me how he and a handful of friends went and rounded up a band of them; forty were killed, and the ringleader was taken from the altar, and cut up to teach the others a lesson."

It was obviously useless talking to him. The utmost they could win was contemptuous permission to organize a garrison for the defence of the house,

if need arose. There were plenty of young and active men on the estate, and household slaves always took pride in demonstrating their superiority to the field workers. Moreover, in defending their master, many of them would be defending their own flesh and blood.

So Gabriel rode with López and the others down to the factory, where guards were posted round the sites on which new boiler houses were languidly being rebuilt. Even the lash could not stir the workers to further effort; their slow, weak movements went on, as on the borders of a dream. The place stank of starvation.

"That lot won't make trouble." López jerked his thin, spatulate thumb at a guarded building, grinned and spat between his teeth. "Perhaps the señor would care to look for himself? Then he can report to Don Santiago."

The door was flung open, and Gabriel glanced, sickening, into an interior whose parallel can only have been the Black Hole of Calcutta. A despairing glitter of eyeballs, a silence more awful than any outcry, broken only by a shuffling of chains: he smothered an exclamation. The captives were leaning, standing, even kneeling on each other. An outflung hand, eloquent in its immobility, was close to Gabriel's feet.

"That man is dead! For pity's sake drag him out. A corpse among all those is enough to start a fever."

López grinned.

"They'll get their exercise later on. It does no harm to remind them of what's coming to them if they start trouble."

Born and brought up as he had been on a plantation, Gabriel had never seen anything like this. Although Thomas and Henry ruled with a rod of iron, the slaves were well housed and well fed, and their punishments regulated by the hand of justice, not of sheer ferocity, as seemed to be the case in Cuba. None of his companions, however, seemed to take these conditions as anything but for granted.

They reached the grinding mill, the roof of which had been repaired and the machinery put in order, when López, who had not missed Gabriel's disgust and disapproval, turned in his saddle to sneer:

"And here, señor, you will see we have prepared another lesson for those who dispute authority!"

Gabriel could hardly believe his eyes. From a hook in one of the wooden rafters, stripped naked, was hung the body of a young negro. The head lolled sideways, the lips swollen, the tongue protruding from evident strangulation. His body was so thin, the bones so elongated and fragile, they might have been those of an overgrown child, and the arches of the ribs stared through flesh that bore the crossed marks of the lash. Crouched at the feet of this object was an old woman, who moaned and held the cold feet to her face. Not a soul else was to be seen; even the crows, which were usually all over the place, had deserted before the presence of death.

López bent from the saddle to strike the old woman about the head and shoulders with his crop.

"Be off home, and tell your other sons what will happen to them if they help people to run away." He laughed as she scuttled away like a frightened hen, and, to Gabriel's horror, poked the corpse in the ribs with the handle of his whip. The bone gave way like a bit of chalk. "Rotten, you see. 'Or

we shouldn't have hanged him. There's nothing to be gained by feeding the like of that, when provisions are short."

"How ill you look!" María Cayetúña met him in the patio; the nurse, who was following, with the baby in her arms, gave him a quick, scared look across her mistress's shoulder.

"Oh, cousin, you would look ill if you had seen what I have seen this morning!" The words were torn from him; he had forgotten for the moment her horror of the negroes.

Her eyes opened widely in sympathetic query.

"One would not treat a dog as López is treating the slaves!"

"The slaves!" A mask slipped across her face, changed its flickering sensitiveness to ivory. "If they are dangerous they must be kept in order, for the sake of—of everybody."

Without another word she went before him into the parlour.

How could she, how could she, who was so tender with those she loved, so gentle and so wise in loving, so pitiful to all dumb beasts—a rare quality in women of her race: but he had actually seen her carry water to a thirsty mule, and exclaim with sorrow upon its galls—how could she be so devoid of mercy to poor human creatures who had done no evil, save, in her eyes, by sharing her dark, detested blood?

"Señor, señor!" He would have followed her, but for the whisper from behind. "Señor, for the love of God—?"

"What is it?" He spoke impatiently. He was deadly tired, wanted only to wash off the polluted dust of Buonaventura, and to forget it all in sleep.

The nurse, Rosario, whose goodwill he had purchased from time to time with gifts of money and gimcrackery, glanced over her shoulder and laid her finger to her lips.

"Let the señor take care of himself. Where he goes, what he does, what he eats, what he drinks . . . *Mi amo* knows it was not a dream. *Mi amo* knows . . ." As though her courage failed her, she rolled up her eyes to heaven, crossed herself, and hurried after María Cayetúña.

. . . So Santiago had meant to kill him. He had tried to thrust back the suspicion which had gained more and more ground in his mind during the last few days. It seemed too fantastic a villainy to attribute to one married to a kinswoman; one who, moreover, up to little more than a month ago, had given every evidence of friendliness and even affection.

It was characteristic of Gabriel that, in this moment, he thought not of Santiago's duplicity, but of how he must be suffering. His instinct was to go straight to his cousin by marriage and say forthright: "You must not be a fool. You must not kill me, for if you do so, my people will certainly find some way of preventing you from touching a penny of your wife's money. Is it worth while to ruin yourself for the sake of punishing me for what, before God, I have not done?"

One could say such things to an Englishman, but not, alas, to a creole. Santiago would pretend to be shocked, would protest his eternal devotion to each and all of his wife's kinsmen, would assure him it was a hallucination—exactly as he had done over the shooting.

"I must not be fanciful," he told himself. "There is not the least proof in the world that Santiago had anything to do with that affair."

From heat and exhaustion he fell asleep on his bed, only to dream exhaustingly of long arguments with Santiago, groaning and tossing his limbs to rid them of the intolerable oppression of the heat which was clamped like a sweaty hand over the island. But he did not dream of death in the form of three grave gentlemen, who stepped off a ship in Havana harbour, with portentous cases of leather which, against the offers of all who tried to relieve them, they insisted upon carrying themselves, who went to an inn, to clean themselves and settle with good Spanish wine stomachs that had suffered too long the outrage of English beer, and, latterly, the outrage of the ocean, before commanding a coach and four to convey them, with all the dignity befitting such important personages, out to the property of Don Santiago de Lorcha.

He did not dream that while he, at his own suggestion, was taking ship from Barbados, their lordships in England had come to their decision; Rice, Jernigan and Grylls, acting on his family's behalf, and advised by counsel who saw no point in fighting for a carcass from which the legal crows had already pecked all the essential nourishment, had thrown in their hand.

Those ponderous leather cases held enough parchment and sealing-wax to give headaches to the lay reader; they made Santiago de Lorcha master of his wife's fortune; and although the inheritance, which was presently to reach her in iron chests filled with English gold, was much smaller than it had been at the beginning of the disputes, it was plutocracy in Cuban coinage.

It had arrived only just in time to save Buonaventura; it had arrived in time to destroy an innocent life.

II

The sky, which all day had ached to let down its moisture, had cleared, and a few low stars blazed near the horizon. Every now and again a gust of wind puffed the palms and rattled the berries of the cinnamons, but brought no relief.

"You must get up! There are visitors—there will be company for supper!"

Doña Vespasiana groaned.

"How can I get up, who have been so tormented and ill-treated? Every bone in my body aches, and even my head is full of rheumatism."

"You will soon forget that," María Cayetuña told her, as she pulled the bedclothes back from the protesting old woman. "Come—Pepita will help you to dress. You must help me to count out the glass and silver—"

"*Madre mia*, who are they—these visitors?" whined the old woman, whose curiosity and fondness for company were, however, already loosening her stiffened limbs, as, with the help of the maid, she crawled out of bed.

"Here is your comb, here is your rouge-pot and mirror: you must be quick—later on there will be time to make a toilette. God knows who they are, but they must be people of importance, for Santiago has told me that nothing must be spared in their entertainment. I have had to send to the López for vanilla and cochineal—we are out of both."

"Are you giving them *ajiaco*?" wheezed Doña Vespasiana, as the maid

jerked on the laces of the corset which was seldom removed, even when its owner went to bed; it was too tiresome to put off and on.

"Ajiaco and sucking-pig," she called across her shoulder, as she ran from the room. The old, childish resilience had come to her aid; after a day in which it seemed as though her heart lay dead in her bosom, a day spent in thinking of nothing but Gabriel's departure, in wondering how she was to bear the years that lay ahead—years in which there would be nothing to do but remember the past, to submit herself to the anger of the one she loved, and make desperate little appeals to heaven to pardon her that other love (yet how can a woman love two men at the same time?—her poor heart struggled in vain to understand)—light shone suddenly in her darkness, because Santiago had sent for her, had spoken to her with the old gentleness, so unexpected that it brought tears to her eyes, and had presented her to three gentlemen, who bowed so low, and made such a formality of their presentation that she was quite embarrassed.

He had given no explanation of their arrival, their names—Don Nicanor Molinos and Don Pedro Echegaray, of Havana, Don Carlos Durán, of Jamaica—meant nothing to her; but she made her formal courtesies and was glad that, in spite of the heat and her own weariness, she had changed into one of the sprigged taffeta gowns of her honeymoon. Although Santiago had given her no directions but to prepare supper for these gentlemen, she knew at once from his tone and his look that it was an occasion of importance, and they had done little formal entertaining at the Villa María-Cayetúña.

So she suffered all the young housewife's anxiety, in her desire to do Santiago credit and to please him a little, so that he might find it easier to forgive her for her disobedience over the baby's baptism. It was fortunately easy, even at such short notice, to get provisions; they grew their own vegetables, and meat was obtainable from the neighbouring farms; a boy was sent galloping to the town for fish—he would only be back just in time to prepare it for the meal, but all Cubans supped late, and the repast was long and leisurely, much wine being consumed between the courses.

Gabriel missed all this commotion, because as soon as he awoke he went out to ride round the estate, seeing that all was well before receiving, in Santiago's name, the keys of the two gates that guarded the property. It struck him that this was, for once, an empty form, as the breach in the walls had not yet been completely repaired. Santiago had lent several of his men to help in the more urgent repairs at Buonaventura, and the wall, although high enough at the broken part to keep in the domestic animals, the cows and goats that provided the house with its milk products, was not higher than a man's chest.

He posted an armed man at the gap, and rode leisurely back to the stables, where he was surprised to discover an unwonted animation, and Adán and his underlings helping strange grooms to rub down the horses of a coach from which the mud was being washed. All seemed unexpectedly cheerful and peaceful; he learned that there were visitors, and returned to the house by a back entrance, to attire himself suitably for company.

III

Sitting at the long table, which blazed with candle-light, he wondered how he could have entertained unworthy suspicions of these sociable, entertaining people. Santiago, who had been carried to his place at the head, was again the genial host of the first evening at the Villa; his laugh rang out from time to time, his wit brought applause from the company, and Gabriel, observing closely, unable at first to credit this sudden change of spirit, came to the conclusion that there was nothing false or strained about his evident enjoyment of his own hospitality.

At the opposite end, María Cayetuña, in a shimmering spread of silvery brocade, shed her sweet, bewildered smile upon her guests, with the air of a child at a party, who cannot imagine what it is all about, but is willing, though a little nervous, to entertain and be entertained. He ventured at one moment to raise his glass to her, and the action, being observed by the gentleman from Jamaica, was taken as a signal for a general toast to "the most gracious, the most sympathetic, the most beautiful lady—la Doña María Cayetuña de Lorcha!" Gabriel noticed that Santiago, far from being annoyed, was much gratified by this tribute, although he smiled and shook his head warningly at Don Carlos, as though bidding him not, for the present, to go too far.

As the meal proceeded, Gabriel further became aware of a strong undercurrent of excitement which centred in some way in Santiago, who occasionally had the air of keeping a deliberate check upon his visitors. There were jokes and sly allusions, nods and nudges, at which Santiago, grimacing, would shake his head; but it was obvious that he was enjoying himself immensely.

Gabriel also had opportunity of marvelling at the enormity of Cuban appetite. Their previous meals, although plentiful, had never, even on the night of his arrival, competed with this entertainment. Roast sucking-pig, iguana and salted ham were served, any one of which would have sufficed Gabriel for a day: but when the dishes were removed, the guests fell with no signs of abated hunger upon the big, succulent island clams, and none but Gabriel refused the lobsters which were served, a complete lobster for each person; with these, together with bowls of small freshwater shrimps. Conversation fell to a low, satisfied hum while these were under discussion, and when at last the piles of débris lay on every one's plate, and Doña Vespasiana was being revived with fruit-juice from an attack of hiccups, the smiling servants came round with the orange-perfumed finger-bowls and napkins of fine damask, for the guests to wash their hands.

Dishes of preserves, of *turrónes* made of guava, quince and orange, were now placed on the table, whose centrepiece was a great silver dish, with ornate inlay of gold, piled with all the fruits imaginable: the alligator pear, tucaco, tamarind, mastic plum, chayote and pineapple. Gabriel broke into a laugh—it was all so like a feast in fairyland! And in the middle of his laughter he was stabbed by Santiago's eye, suddenly, coldly, like a dagger in the heart. At the next moment Santiago was smiling, bowing to his dear

cousin across a glass of wine. Gabriel felt the muscles in his cheeks tightening. So it was not over, that enmity; this was not a feast of love—so far as he was concerned. He found himself counting the days to his departure.

After supper, in the parlour, where the air was soon blue with the smoke of the men's cigars, María Cayetúña, by her husband's wish, sang to them

"I shall remember this for ever," Gabriel was thinking, as, half withdrawn into the shadows beyond the candle-light, he listened. And even as he thought it—so strange, so mysterious is the power of premonition—it seemed that for ever would be a very short time.

He had not offered to accompany her; indeed, his skill was not equal to public performance. He watched her where she sat, a little away from the company, in a chair with a high, straight back, her guitar across her bosom that seemed to nestle upon it, as her small, delicate fingers with the pointed nails wove their curious, circular pattern upon the strings: as her slender throat stretched itself, swelled a little, and sent forth those strains of undiluted beauty that had completed her conquest of Santiago de Lorcha in the chapel of Santa Clara. Her lips smiled faintly, her eyes were far away; it was not this time the sweet call of a girl to her lover, but a woman saying farewell to a dream.

It was her farewell, he knew it, to him: while his eyes memorized every line of that transparent face, the soft, olive cheek, the blue tracery of the temples, and the darkening of the eyelids. If, instead of being a poet, he had been a painter! And, for the second time that evening, he caught Santiago's eyes upon him, with a naked, an indecent triumph in them. "He sees that I suffer. Let him see it, if it makes him feel less unhappy himself."

The audience was enraptured, the discreet, elderly visitors heaped compliments upon Santiago—since it was not correct, in her husband's presence, too openly to flatter a lady.

It was Santiago's suggestion that they should sit for a little upon the porch. The night was miraculous, and all the invisible grass was gemmed with fireflies. Gabriel found himself beside Don Carlos, who had had a little more to drink than discretion decreed.

"Ay, it is good to be back in the islands again!"

"You have been abroad?"

"*Hombre!* I have been in England."

Before Gabriel could exclaim upon this, there was a scream from Doña Vespasiana.

"What is it? What is that?"

All eyes turned to where her trembling finger pointed; the porch overlooked the walls and the falling ground between Santiago's land and Buonaventura. While they looked, a pink fan of light blew into the southern sky, waved for a moment and sank. All were silent.

"There it is again!" Gabriel leapt to his feet.

"There's fire at Buonaventura!"

"No, that's not Buonaventura; it's too far to the left."

"*Madre de dios*, am I a dead man, that no one pays attention to me?" Santiago was vainly trying to drag himself to his feet. Gabriel and one of the men from Cuba hurried to his side; when the pair of them had got the

lame man supported between them, the fire had gained strength; a steady glow of red painted the sky.

"That is not my father's; it is the house of López."

"Ay, the poor Doña Emanuela and her four daughters!" wailed Doña Vespasiana, whose favourite diversion was to take chocolate with the overseer's wife. "We shall be the next—Holy Mother of God, we shall be the next!"

"Be silent, woman!"

"Do not be so foolish." The hand of María Cayetúña pressed the weeping woman's shoulder. "How can any one get through our walls?" She had forgotten the gap; both Gabriel and Santiago were glad of her forgetfulness.

There were running feet below, and the dark shadows of the outdoor workers were beneath the railing of the porch.

"*Amo! Amo! Fire at B'onaventu'a!*"

"Back to your places!" shouted Santiago; with anxiety and the effort of standing, although supported by Gabriel and Don Pedro, sweat was pouring down his face. "That this should happen at a time when I can do nothing!"

In the silence of the night the sound of horses' feet went pounding along the track that led past the gates to Buonaventura; it sounded like ten or a dozen.

"They've seen; they're going to help," muttered Santiago. He groped for a cloth to wipe his face, and his wife, who had come to stand close beside him, lifted a fold of her gown and performed the office for him tenderly. "Close the shutters," he told her, "and go into the basement; take the other women with you—and send Antonio and Sombra to me."

"I would rather stay with you."

"With me? What use am I but to give orders, which others must obey?" But his look, lingering on her lips, was an embrace. She turned obediently, putting her arm round the shoulders of Doña Vespasiana, and, more by will than by physical strength, propelled the fat, terrified woman indoors.

They lowered Santiago into his chair, while he explained to the three visitors the significance of the fires.

"But there is no danger *here*?" The voice of the speaker quavered a little; Don Nicanor was evidently not a man of war.

"*Cal* Of course there is no danger. But we do not want women crying and making noises, do we, when there are other things to think about."

"There's somebody coming from the gates!"

"They can't be coming from the gates; I have the key——" Gabriel was beginning, while the beat of a horse's hoofs rang nearer and nearer under the clear, starlit sky.

"It's Rodríguez!"

"How did you get in?" Santiago shouted, as the horse slithered to a standstill. Its rider threw himself out of the saddle and came up the steps, while the horse moved away and started mildly to crop the grass.

"I jumped through the gap; I think I may have killed one of your negroes," said Rodríguez carelessly. "The fool got in my way, though I shouted to warn him, and the pair of us landed on top of him—which nearly broke my mare's ankle! Well, they've murdered López." In the light that streamed out from the unshuttered parlour one man's face turned to

another's in consternation. Murder of an overseer was no light matter—even in Cuba, where the value set on human life was slight. "And his house is burning merrily. No one's been near your father's, but he's down there with the rest, holding them off the factory. It's a damnable affair, Santiago, and I'm afraid it's going to cost you the ocean in slaves."

He looked round the company, and an expression of astonishment came into his face.

"Molinos! Echegaray! How in the name of God——!"

"What about López's family?" He had never before been glad to hear of the death of a man, Gabriel was thinking; but animosity did not extend to women and children.

"They seem to have got away. I suppose they're hiding in the fields; if they aren't caught by the blacks, I expect they'll try to get here. I told your gatemen to be on the look-out. There are niggers all over the place, Santiago: I've a shrewd suspicion some of them are *cimarrónes*—and all roaring drunk!"

Gabriel turned quickly to the butler, who had appeared at his elbow.

"You will find the gate-keys on the chest in my room; take them down to the men, and tell them to find out who is there before they open."

"After burning Lopez's place," Rodríguez was continuing, "they broke into the little tavern between Buonaventura and our plantation; they've murdered the tavern-keeper, and the tale goes they've kidnapped his wife. That looks like *cimarrón* work, doesn't it? By God, after this there'll have to be an organized drive against the rabble."

"How much damage have they done?" muttered Santiago.

"Little, up to now. They're too drunk to know what they're doing, and, to my mind, it's sheer waste of powder and shot—not to speak of nigger flesh—to turn the guns on them. But all your father's servants are armed, and you know what it is: put a gun in the hands of a nigger, and he won't stop shooting till the ammunition's gone."

"Who's there—looking after them?"

"Ortega, and Gálvez, and Latorre Puertas—I don't know how many others; they saw the blaze, as we did ourselves, and as many as had people to leave in charge rode over to lend a hand."

"Hush: what's that?"

A shot rang out in the dark.

"One can see nothing from here."

"It was at the gate, wasn't it?"

"Sounded so."

"Only madmen would attack a place like this." Again the quavering voice of Don Nicanor sought courage from the stars.

"They're madmen," Rodríguez grimly assured him. "Ordinarily you would stop a thing like this with a couple of shots, but they're so full of rum there's no knowing where it will finish. If they get at the factory spirit——!"

"But surely there is nothing here to attract them!"

Santiago's laugh crackled in the silence that followed the tremulous query.

"You have not forgotten how to use a gun, *amigos*, during your sojourn in England?"

"*Por dios*, I was never a marksman!" cried Don Nicanor, amid the laughter of his companions.

"We might do worse than to arm ourselves," said Rodríguez drily. "When the Cuban negro's drunk he has only two desires: to show his indifference to property, and to have women. It will not go well with the *Señoritas López* if they are found in the fields to-night."

"God in heaven!" cried Gabriel. "And you sit and talk about it?"

"What would you have me do?" The faint antagonism of native to foreigner was in the inflection of Rodríguez's voice.

"Send out a search party; these poor women must be protected at all costs!"

"Calm yourself, señor; there is already a search party. Which is not to say it will arrive in time. . . . It struck me I might be of more use here than joining search parties." Rodríguez turned again to Santiago. "Forgive me, *hombre*, that I seem to know more of your affairs than you do yourself. . . ."

Santiago spread out his hands.

"Is it not inevitable——?"

"The boy López hanged yesterday is the nephew of one of your gate-men." Gabriel started; why had he not found this out himself? "Desire for revenge might make your fellow less attentive to his duties than usual."

"You mean, he would let them through."

"He's probably not there to keep them out. I should not be surprised if he took a hand in the burning to-night. Then there is the gap in your wall. If I were you, I should send someone down there without further delay, since I seem to have laid out its guardian."

CHAPTER XIII

I

THE household consisted only of ten indoor servants, seven of whom were women. The men were the butler, Antonio; Sombra, Santiago's body-servant; and the night watchman—who, as Gabriel remembered, was not to be trusted. Or perhaps his master could trust him; it is not a bad thing to have a servant who can be trusted only by oneself. These three were summoned, and stood in readiness to load the guns; of the three, Antonio alone could shoot. This made the garrison on the porch up to the number of five, Santiago and Don Nicanor being out of the running—the former on account of his wounded shoulder, and the latter far too frightened to do anything but pray feverishly to his saint, and incommode the others by his nervous fidgeting. A sixth recruit was Bat, who, at Gabriel's insistence, was brought in to assist in the defence of his master's host. Bat was an excellent shot.

"If they think you're alone, they'll be after the horses and the women," Rodríguez told Santiago, who then sent the dozen or so of outdoor labourers, who had gathered excitedly to hear their master's orders, to guard the stables, under the leadership of Adan.

The parlour shutters were now closed, and the porch was dark, but there was enough starlight to enable the watchers to draw a bead on whatever target presented itself. In the hush that followed the hasty council, Adan, who had sent two of his men to round up the beasts and bring them into the yard, was heard shouting; the dull thud of the cows' hoofs as they trotted across the turf, followed by the scuffling goats, went past the front of the house; the goats' eyes shone towards the porch briefly, their pale scuts glimmered past, chased by the yaps of the negroes.

"Perhaps you are not going to have trouble after all," Don Carlos was saying on a note of disappointment. As a Jamaican, he had heard plenty of the "slave trouble" for which, at that time, Cuba was notorious, and had looked forward to seeing something of it at first hand.

"Hush." That was Rodríguez. At one moment they could have heard the falling of a leaf; at the next, the faint, ragged growl that heralds a company stirred the silence that flowed between the house, and the palms, and the walls.

"They're here. That's sharp going. Or perhaps it isn't the Buonaventura lot; they'd hardly have had time to get here—unless they set out while the others were doing the burning."

A few scattered shots rang out: possibly from the men who were supposed to be defending the gap—followed by shouts and the whooping yell of the drunken nigger. Pandemonium broke loose.

"At this rate they'll raise the countryside; we shan't want for supporters if they succeed in breaking through the walls." There was grim satisfaction in Santiago's tone.

"If the countryside isn't already over at Buonaventura. It sounds as if the walls aren't holding." Simultaneously the five men, Gabriel with them, raised

their guns and balanced them across the rail. The only sound was Santiago's hard breathing.

A figure appeared, running, or rather lolloping hesitantly, down the slope of turf where it broke from the shadow of the trees that masked the near section of the wall. It wore the pale striped cotton trousers of the field worker; it turned, waved its arms and shouted to its unseen companions, then, as though alarmed by its own temerity, ran back again.

Presently from the shadows emerged a straggling group. In spite of the staves that some were waving, and the guns that others carried clumsily, as though not used to such objects, there was, to Gabriel, something pitiful about the advance of the slaves on their ambush. Apart from six or seven brawling fellows who, rum-valiant, urged on their companions while keeping themselves well in the background, there was a lack of conviction about the party which communicated itself instantly to the hidden watchers. Rodríguez smothered a laugh.

"This lot isn't worth powder—unless they get near the stables!"

The words, however, had barely left his lips when, with a yell, two horsemen tore from the trees and, circling round the uncertain company of slaves, seemed to exhort them to continue their advance. The horses, even in the starlight, were ragged beasts, and the men who rode them, with guns laid across the saddlebows, partly naked.

"*Cimarrónes!* I thought as much. They certainly believe you are alone, Santiago; they are the most cowardly devils on earth, and nothing but certainty would drive them to an open attack like this, even with the slaves to back them."

Don Nicanor whispered:

"I shall go and protect the ladies!" A smothered laugh followed him as he crushed his plump body through the narrow aperture Antonio made for him through the door.

It seemed as though, for all the pressure put on them by the *cimarrónes*, who rode round and round the crowd, bending low from their saddles to speak to those who were in a state to listen, that the slaves could not make up their minds to attack. One or two, surrendered to alcohol, were already sprawling on the grass, among the rest was the kind of fuddled ill humour that finds its outlet in wanton destruction, but they evidently could not make up their minds what to destroy. The house itself, strong, solid, formidable, baffled them; it was not, like the López place, a tumbledown affair of gimcrack balconies and warped shutters, through which it was easy to fling their balls of tow soaked in paraffin. The crowd hung about and growled, uncertain of what to do next. Eventually abandoning them, the *cimarrónes*, of whom there were now five or six, galloped off towards the stables, where a rattle of gunfire proved that Adan and his supporters were ready to receive them.

The sound of the shots, although not directed at themselves, disconcerted the slaves, but it did not, as Gabriel expected, immediately drive them away. They started to shout and to move slowly forward; one or two started to run, and there was actually a laugh—the senseless, negroid laugh of pleasurable excitement. The silence of the house, although the stables echoed with shots and the yells of the *cimarrónes*, gave them confidence. The Young One was

sick in bed, and a sick man cannot defend his property. Somewhere inside that silent darkness were food, more drink, and women—many women.

They crawled forward in a dark tide towards the guns which none of them could see. Gabriel was astonished to see how many they were, and realized with sickening certainty that if they were to make up their minds to rush the porch, using their guns and staves, its defenders would stand little chance. Ice crawled in the roots of his hair, as he thought what this would mean to the women inside.

A huge fellow seemed now to have made himself the ringleader. It was the runaway slave who had been marked down as the criminal of the bohios. He and a very young boy were in front of the rest: the boy's face was silly, bland and split by the silver segment of his grin; he obviously did not know why he was there or what he was doing, but, dazed with liquor, he ambled forward and was the first to come within range of the guns. Rodríguez's shot took him straight in the face; he gave a piercing scream and clapped his hands to the blood.

The big fellow, who carried a gun, and had stripped himself to the loin-cloth, now lifted his weapon and blazed back at the porch; the bullet cracked in the wall just behind Santiago's head.

"Let them have it."

The guns spat from the porch, and there was instant chaos. Several men dropped, whether from fear or from wounds it was impossible to see. Those who had guns let them off clumsily in the dark. Don Carlos neatly, and with every appearance of pleasure, picked off a boy who was clambering into a tree, very much as if he were shooting buzzards, and Rodríguez turned with a smile from his own reloading to say:

"*Hombre*, remember for our friend's sake that slaves cost money, and shoot to maim rather than to kill!"

Two horses without riders thundered across the grass.

"Are those ours, or the *cimarrónes*?"

"They are not ours," Gabriel reported. He thought of María Cayetuña, and wondered if she was frightened by the noise of the shooting. The gun kicked his shoulder as he fired, purposely low—and almost at the same moment there came a grunt from Don Carlos, followed by a burst of oaths. It could only have been a chance bullet, but it had passed through the Jamaican's biceps muscle, totally disabling him as a shot.

Dark figures ran hither and thither, screaming with fear and sometimes with agony; those who wanted to escape had lost their sense of direction, some cried out pitifully their willingness to surrender. To Gabriel it seemed obvious that they were already beaten; he was horrified when none of his companions ceased to fire.

"Santiago! They are finished. It only remains now to cut off their escape——" Even as he spoke, Antonio, at his master's command, was leaping across the railing and running towards the stables, where, for the last few minutes, there had been silence; either the raiders were killed or they had fled.

To Gabriel's amazement Santiago had snatched up the gun which Antonio had left behind him. At no one knew what cost in pain, he had it pressed into

his shoulder. He made no reply. Both Rodríguez and Don Pedro fired again; there were a few low shrubs not far from the porch behind which a handful of bolder spirits had ensconced themselves, to snipe clumsily back. But the majority were in flight; their thin wailing was like the wailing of children—and it was as children that Gabriel saw them, pitying them for their wrongdoing, no less than for the punishment that awaited them.

Two more horses galloped from the stables, and Gabriel at first took them for *cimarrónes* as they thundered after the retreating slaves; but to his astonishment the riders drove them through and ahead of the fugitives, only to swing them round and drive them again towards the house. Mad with terror, the slaves turned and rushed like driven partridges towards the guns.

"*Hombre, qué es eso?*" he heard Rodríguez say.

Santiago's gun spoke the reply. The others lowered their weapons to gaze at him in astonishment. Had he gone mad, thus to prescribe the destruction of his total means of livelihood.

Driven by the horsemen, whom Gabriel now recognized as two of the grooms, the slaves came on; there was nothing for it but to shoot. He saw the staring eyes, the open, agonized mouths, saw youths and men flinging themselves on the ground as though to pray for mercy, while the guns rattled again and again. He saw Bat's jaw drop, his face turn ashen, and the gun sag in his hands—and made him a last, frantic gesture before turning and rushing into the house.

II

"They are murdering your people!"

He leaned panting against the inner side of the door; she faced him, with her back to the terrified women who crouched against the walls and behind the furniture; Doña Vespasiana had crawled beneath a table, where, like a dog, she whimpered on hands and knees.

"No—no! They are not my people."

"They are yours, and they are being murdered for rebelling against infamous treatment. I am telling you. I have seen it. There are people among them with as much white blood as you in their bodies, and they are being shot down because they have empty stomachs and their bodies are sore with the lash."

"No—no. You cannot say such things to me!"

"I can say them because I love you—because your dark blood makes me love you more than I thought it possible ever to love a woman. Think: your father loved one of them. Because of that love you are here. Oh, María Cayetuña of my heart!"—careless of who should hear him, he used the classic endearment—"won't you do something to save them?"

"What—what could I do?" at last she faltered. Her head drooped towards her bosom, he could not see her face.

"To whom will Santiago listen, if not to you? Tell him to stop them firing—God in heaven, he's ruining himself as well as the slaves! Tell him to let them alone—they are so drunk, poor creatures, they do not know what they are doing; they no longer mean any evil——"

"Have they not done enough? They have burned López's house and killed him."

"In their place I should have done the same. Let them be locked up for the night, and when morning comes promise them *yourself* that there shall be no more flogging if they return quietly to their work. They will all be willing, now López is dead. Do this, my dearest, for Santiago's sake—and for your own!"

Had he the right to ask so much of her? Yet, for the sake of his love, he knew he could not let this thing go. For the sake of his idealism, of his worship and his renunciation, his soul prayed to hers to occupy the shrine in which he had placed it—while the guns crackled outside, and a long, inhuman wail betrayed the mortally wounded.

"It is the last thing you can do for me—or I for you!" There was no more to be feared—he knew it—from the negroes; it only remained to stop this hideous slaughter.

He held out his arm, felt her sag towards him—and knew, in a burst of ecstasy, that she had yielded. Neither of them thought of or cared for observation—who, indeed, was in a condition to observe: the maids wailing, Don Nicanor on his plump knees, beseeching all the angels, Doña Vespasiana crouched beneath the table. But he forgot that, in opening the door, their two joined figures would be clearly visible against the light within.

Antonio had just taken the still smoking gun from his master and handed him another, Santiago half-turning to receive it.

He saw the two standing side by side, and raised the gun deliberately. Before Gabriel had time to think what she was doing, María Cayetuña, with a cry, had thrown herself between him and Santiago, and Don Pedro, with an imprecation, knocked the gun-barrel upwards in Santiago's hands. The weapon exploded, filling the porch with the stink and darkness of powder, and while Gabriel still stood, as though petrified, Santiago, dragging himself from the chair with a movement of horrible purpose, thrust his wife aside and allowed the tremendous weight of his helpless limbs so to fall on Gabriel that the latter, losing his balance, was thrown down the steps of the porch.

They rolled, the pair of them, down on the bloodstained earth, Gabriel so clutched about by the elder man's arms that he could neither save himself nor drag himself free. At the height of the shock he felt his own flesh cringe at the thought of Santiago's pain, as, groaning and writhing, the spittle running from the corners of his mouth, the latter groped for his throat.

"For the love of God, cousin!—we are mad——"

Then someone dragged Santiago off, and he felt the still-warm body of a negro under him, and he slipped sideways, his face pressed into a stickiness that could only be blood.

The shooting had stopped, and the others were there, lifting Santiago; Gabriel felt a great weight shift from his thighs; he was sick and giddy, he struggled half-way to his feet, and, from his knees, saw María Cayetuña half-collapsed across the railing of the porch. They were carrying Santiago up the steps—it took all the strength of four men to do it. Don Carlos seemed to be supporting María Cayetuña with his sound arm. The stars were very bright.

The big, ruffianly negro who, shot through the ankle, and fallen almost at

the foot of the steps. had lain quiet, feigning death until such moment as it was expedient to crawl away, saw his opportunity; slid the knife quietly from his loincloth and drove it in deeply at the back of Gabriel's ribs.

III

The sky was a very pale emerald when the last stragglers left the Villa; it was no lively departure. Against the wall were piled the bodies of Santiago's dead negroes—and that in itself was enough to cause a sensation; the news was all over the neighbourhood before dawn. A man who could afford to shoot up an entire plantation must needs be a millionaire; for the perilously-near bankrupt de Lorchá to do such a thing was taken as clear proof that the Young One was out of his senses. Still, he had done a favour to his neighbours; there would be no more negro risings for a long time, and even the *cimarrónes* would go cautiously after this. Buonaventura, of course, was ruined; thumbs, and the corners of mouths, were turned down; some faintly hypocritical sympathy was spilled on the Old One; it was a sad end for him, after the long tradition of de Lorchá glory on the island.

All this, of course, before the real news broke. . . .

Among the younger families, friendly to, or merely acquainted with Santiago, it was solemnly agreed that by shooting his cousin by marriage (the truth about Gabriel's death was not known for several days, and then few accepted it, as the other was the more highly coloured, and therefore, to Cuban taste, the more acceptable version) he had avenged his dishonour in a noble and classic, although particularly silly, manner: for now, of course, he would never see the colour of the English money. It was felt by the realistic Cubans that most of them would have put up with a little dishonour, or found some other means of avenging it, if a fortune of that magnitude were involved.

The few who knew the truth left the Villa with the dawn; it had been an exciting night, but that last little episode had not exactly put a fillip on it. The three lawyers had waited to see Gabriel dead, and it was on Don Pedro's advice that the burial took place at once; since the Englishman was not a Catholic, there was no point in waiting for a priest. A most unfortunate occurrence. But, as Don Carlos pointed out while they were bandaging his wounded arm, it might well have been more unfortunate "If this had occurred six months ago, señores, and if the affair had been reported in England——!"

Don Nicanor, who had only partly recovered from the shattering of his nervous system, shivered, and drank copiously of the decoction of aperient herbs in crude cognac which was a favourite pick-me-up in the island. He was a sensitive and, considering his profession, a moral little man, whose domestic life was almost sensationally virtuous; he was very much shaken by the night's happenings.

"I will tell you a thing, señores." He shook his head solemnly. "I am as fond as the next man, I am sure, of luxuries; but if you were to offer me this English money on a golden platter—*no, señor!* I would not take it."

A chorus of sardonic disbelief greeted the dramatic announcement. Don Nicanor lifted up a small, fat hand in a gesture of admonishment.

"*No, señor!* There is a curse upon it."

"*Anda, hombre—!*"

"Only follow its record—the record of those who have inherited it—during the last two decades. The first legatee, Jason"—his pronunciation made an aspirate of the J and emphasized the second syllable—"died on the eve of inheritance: and it was not a natural death. The second, Mateo—we know his fate. And now it comes here—and death comes with it."

"Death, perhaps"—Don Carlos shrugged his shoulders and spread out his fingers—"and also life! Life for Buonaventura. Do not forget that, but for the money from England, Buonaventura"—he pointed through the window to the grim frieze that lay along the foot of the wall—"perished last night."

Don Nicanor shivered again.

"It is not the end," he said solemnly, and gazed around him. "And the sooner I get out of this house, señores, the better I shall be pleased."

"I can do with my bed, too, *amigo*. Do we bid farewell to de Lorcha?"

"He is coming to my office in the morning," shortly said Don Pedro. "That is, if he is in a state to travel. I think it would not be tactful to disturb him for the present."

So the hired coach with its attendants—who were all agog with the events of the night, and eager to spread their tidings in Havana—came round, and three weary gentlemen got into it and were driven away. As the coach went down the drive a few negroes, listlessly digging the foss that was to receive the bodies of their companions, raised dull heads, then lowered them again to their sombre task.

The rising sun laid a broad swath of gold across the new-turned earth of Gabriel's grave. Before it had detached itself fully from the horizon, a *guajiro* had discovered the mutilated body of one of the señoritas López in a thicket of cane. Neither Doña Emanuela nor her other daughter were ever seen again—it came to be accepted that the elder lady had been flung into one of the deeper ponds, and that the señorita Luisa had been kidnapped by the *cimarrónes*. The black ruin of the López home stood up like a rotten tooth on its hilltop. The outbuildings of Buonaventura, and two or three other small properties were also in ruins, and there was great destruction to the canes. Don Pepe was reported to be smoking his cigar on his veranda—a gesture conveying (as it was intended to convey) refusal to accept defeat.

It was very quiet beside Gabriel's grave, and the morning air blew sweetly across it. The negro Bat bent down and rubbed the palm of his hand very softly over the disturbed earth; it was thus he had "rubbed sleep" into a feverish little boy whom he had learned to call master. He stood for a moment looking down.

"Cuba sho' is a bad place for white folk, an' fo' black folk too, Mars' Gabriel," he said quietly; and quietly he ran from around his body the rope he had "borrowed" from one of the stable hands. Very quietly, nonchalantly even, he tossed it over the branch of a tree and secured it in its place. It was Mars' Gabriel who had shown him how to make a slip-knot. . . .

IV

"The news has come from England. All our troubles are over. There is nothing you cannot have. Nothing that shall not be yours for the asking." He implored her with his voice, with his eyes, with his soul.

Her head lay so still on the pillow, turned from him with such finality, that she could not have heard.

"Wife of my eyes, of my heart, do you hear me? I care for nothing, but for your sake."

She turned her head very slowly, without opening her eyes.

"Yes. I hear you."

Her body was like the withered sheath of a flower whose petals have been swept away; the frail, naked shell of her head was like the skulls children pick up and play with on the sites of forgotten burial grounds.

"I wished to tell no one until I had told you. I wished to tell you myself." Blundering, childish, like a child learning to talk.

He cast a glance impatient with terror on the motionless form. His fingers twisted the chain of the holy medal his mother had hung round his neck for his confirmation. Only filial piety had prevented his throwing it away; he now clung to it as to his one hope of salvation.

"*Gloria mia!*" he broke out. "*Gloria mia*, I did not do it. Before God, I did not do it!"

"No, *esposo mio*." Her voice came like a thin echo from far away. "Chance did it for you."

He racked his brain for words that might break the silence that had fallen—it seemed for ever—between them; but no words would come, for he could not in decency ask a woman in her condition the one question that burned his brain by day and night: had she been unfaithful to him?

He could only sit, hour after hour, where they had propped him, beside her narrow bed, with the dull thoughts beating through his mind with the desolate persistence of the great bell of Santa Clara, which, at that very time, shook its one note at long intervals over Havana. He could not even tell her a thing which would surely have moved her: that the Abbess was dead.

All thoughts, all things of which they had ever spoken together lay dead between them: even as Gabriel Flood lay dead in Cuban earth; even as joy lay dead in Santiago's heart. There was no rejoicing left in him—neither for the death of his enemy nor for the end of all his material troubles. The richest man in Havana sat and mourned for laughter that was stilled, passion that was ended, sweet intimacy of married lovers—all vanished like a dream.

"María Cayetuña, for God's love speak to me!"

There was an appalling silence. Then he flung himself on his knees, regardless of his reopened wound; words poured from him, all the poison which had been in his heart for weeks came up like vomit, tears rolled down his cheeks, he smote his breast in an agony of penitence.

He felt himself growing weaker as his soul purged itself, so weak that he might be going to die. He crossed himself, and all the time, between himself and the figure on the bed, there was the terribly gentle face of Gabriel, as he

had seen it, dead, with the dawn coming up over the palms. It was like the face of one of his little brothers who had died in childhood, and the full horror of that which he had not done, but had tried to do, came over Santiago with such violence that he felt he could only die: it was the only solution of this agony his own actions had bound upon him.

It was then she spoke, unconsciously, the only cruel words she ever said to him in her life: spoke them as though they came through her, from some distant place to which her soul had travelled, regardless of her will.

"You see, he was all that I had, of my own."

It must have been Santiago's good angel—so long withdrawn—that gave him grace to understand her; but that she had stricken him was audible in his reply.

"Have you not me? Have I not given you a child?"

"Was it wrong of me?"—she seemed to be speaking to herself—"to want something of my own?—something that no one had given me, like my hands, my feet, my eyes and ears? Houses, lands, jewels, money—any one can have those things; any one can give them. But blood . . . that's different."

"If I had cut my finger, and Gabriel had done the same: and if our blood had flowed into a basin, it would have been the same blood. My great-grandfather was his grandfather, and we were born with the same name; that made us belong to each other, in a way that had nothing to do with loving or not loving; nothing to do with the way you and I belong to each other, which is the loving way, and nothing can change that, because, of course, nothing can change loving." She said it with a simplicity that took his breath away.

"Until you came I had no one: no one, I mean, that I had ever seen or known. My English relations—I had heard of them, of course; it was like history. It was very difficult to believe that those people lived and talked and acted as we did ourselves. Some of the girls at Santa Clara thought I was making it up when I talked about my family; I almost began to think so myself, in the end. It was too . . . difficult. Brothers, sisters, cousins; every one had them but me. I was ashamed; *dios mio*, how I was ashamed."

"My glory! Of what had you to be ashamed?" His lips were laid to the back of her hand.

"Then Gabriel came—at last! And I—I felt that I was somebody real."

"When have you been anything but real to me?"

She opened her eyes, to look at him so tenderly, with so deep and loving a compassion, that it was now he who might have been her child; she made a faint movement, as though she would have gathered him to her bosom.

"Yes. I loved Gabriel. And what does that do to you and me?"

He felt her pity, like the pity of the Blessed Virgin, for all the evil he had conceived in his heart, for all his un-faith, for all his rejection of that upon which her own faith was built. And he felt in her confession, at one moment the certain proof of her innocence, and at the next, shuddered at its implication of disloyalty to himself; and at last, characteristically, there came to him the only way in which he dared regard it. She had said the words—but in her weakness she had not known what she was saying.

He was to bury the memory of her words deep—so deep that he came in time to believe they had never been spoken: deep in his will that she had never

spoken them. It was necessary for his pride that he should believe she had never spoken them.

He thought of a thousand foolish, material things it was now in his power to promise her; he began to mutter about them, half-shamefacedly, wondering why they should sound so thin and pitiful, so wholly inexpressive of his love for her

"You shall have a house in Havana, and as many servants as you please; you shall receive whom you choose, and I will make all the country fawn on your doorstep. You shall be envied wherever you go. . . ."

He gave a great sigh. Then, out of the pain she had caused him, out of those dim, unacknowledged agonies of conscience that arrogance denied, was born his final sacrifice."

"And I will—if you wish it—send for the priest."

But he had made his offer at the wrong moment. He spoke to one so numbed by calamity that messages from the outer world could not reach her brain. And presently—so closely runs ignobility with its opposite in human nature—Santiago looked at her sidelong, and was glad that she had not heard.

CHAPTER XIV

I

"PAPA. Which do you love best—me or Mama?"

Santiago laughed, rather gravely, as he looked at his seven-year-old daughter; gravity had become habitual with him of latter years. More than ever he was grave when he looked at this great girl of his—big, and strong as a boy, her small chest thrusting out the starched pleats of a striped cotton bodice, her back as straight as a plank, her limbs alive with vigour.

No, she was not pretty; not even paternal prejudice could claim that for her. But there was something dominant in that rather heavy profile, and she held her head like a young queen. She had a way, too, of looking at people from beneath the bar of her black brows that made them hesitate to trifle with her; already the servants took their orders from her without question, and feared her displeasure more than they feared that of her mother.

Santiago was proud of his girl; proud of her very oddity—worthy of a de Lorcha—and even his sister Isabela knew better than to pass disparaging remarks about one who already looked her up and down in a very unchildlike way. Isabela was waiting her time: one day she would wipe the satisfaction off that insolent young face! She agreed with Santiago that it was better, for the present, that María Pía should be kept ignorant of her heredity.

"Why should she ever learn it—until she is old enough to make nothing of it?" He meant, until she was sufficiently poised in her own white universe to be confident of herself as a de Lorcha. This was his main reason for refusing the mother's oft-repeated prayer that he should send the child to Santa Clara. In those days he denied María Cayetuña nothing, save only that: and it was well for his peace of mind that María Pía herself was on his side.

"Why do you ask me that silly question, *hija*?"

"Because I know Mama is worrying again about sending me to school, and I don't wish to go," pouted María Pía.

"Be at rest; you will not go."

"I can't go, can I?—because who will look after Mama and the house if I am away?"

"Who indeed!" Santiago smiled proudly at his daughter's concern and confidence in her own importance.

"It would just mean that Tía Isabela would manage everything."

"Now, now! You know your mother is not strong enough to look after the house the way it should be kept."

"Well, there's me, isn't there, Papa?—and what are the servants for, unless they do as they are told? I can tell you they would much rather take their orders from me than from Tía Isabela."

"They will take all their orders from you when you are a little older."

"But I want them *now*!" She stamped an emphatic foot. "Papa, the house is ours, isn't it? And Tía Isabela has got her great house in Havana—what does she want with ours? She is always telling the servants to alter things and move them about from room to room, and I just tell them to move them back. It is Mama's house and mine, and we don't want it the way Tía Isabela wants it."

"Your aunt is a very fashionable woman, and she has very good taste."

"When I'm grown up," said María Pía, tossing her head, "I'll have a house in Havana, and it will be much finer than the Aroche palace, and everybody will come and visit me!"

"Then you had better learn some manners, if you are going to be a hostess in society!"

"I've learnt my curtsies and I can nearly manage my fan, and I work hard at my lessons; I can recite almost the whole of my fables!"

Santiago frowned; he did not want a bluestocking for a daughter, but on María Cayetuña's insistence he had procured a Frenchwoman to act as her companion and governess. Madame Deschamps, one of the thousands of French immigrants who had come to Cuba since the ceding of San Domingo, had managed to convince him that, although a Catholic, she was quite without religious bias. The French, he knew, were pleasantly cynical about their religion—and they had no prejudice about mixed blood. Madame Deschamps was amused, her interest stimulated, by her new pupil, and she had eagerly accepted this means of adding to her depleted income.

"May I put on my breeches and ride with you?"

"I am not riding this morning; I am going over to see your grandfather."

"Oh, please, please, may I come?" She was jumping up and down with excitement; not the utmost strictures of Madame Deschamps could induce in María Pía the prescribed decorum of the young lady. "I do so like it at Buenaventura; why don't we live there, Papa?"

"We shall do, some day." The old man was very weak, blind, and dependent on those about him, who, surrounding him with their heedless and childlike affection, profited by his dependence to neglect more thoroughly than ever their household tasks.

"I like it because it's so untidy, and full of people, and things are always the way you don't expect. Last time we went, I found—did I tell you?—four eggs in one of the beds. Yes, and they were quite warm and fresh, and the chicks were pecking to get out. I wish Mama would let me have a hen on my bed, Papa; but Madame Deschamps won't even let me take the little cat to bed with me. It's all very stiff and proper at our house, Papa! Why don't we have negroes, like Grandpapa? They are so nice; they do nothing but laugh and sing, and it makes things so lively," she complained.

"Your mother does not care for them; and you know everything must be as she wants it," reproved Santiago.

"She doesn't know everything we do, does she, Papa?" The dark eyes twinkled. "She doesn't know about the little bulls!"

"*Callate!*" But his eyes twinkled as well. No, María Cayetuña knew nothing about that wicked adventure, shared by the pair of them, out on the savanna where the little bull calves grazed as soon as they were old enough to be separated from their mothers: where María Pía, up on her pony that

she rode as though she had been born in the saddle, tickled a little bull with the light staff he had given her, and was rolled off her pony and bumped all over the grass—roaring with laughter as though it were the best of all jokes.

"Papa, it's not true, is it, that Tía Isabela used to fight the real bulls?"

"Why should it not be true? Your aunt placed as good a pair of darts as any bullfighter I have seen."

"Like this?" Rising on her toes, she took the enchanting attitude, arms lifted, wrists drooping: she mimed the position so perfectly that one could see the *banderillas* dropping from her small, brown hands.

"Like that, but on horseback: it is only the professionals who fight on foot," he reminded her. She had seen her first professional fight in Havana a week or two before, and, throned in the gallery, with her first mantilla draped over her proud head, had applauded vigorously the prowess of six de Lorchas, two of which had delighted both her and her father by proving too much for the *matadores* engaged to deal with them.

"Huh," said María Pía, with evident dissatisfaction. "I thought Ramón was lying."

"What did Ramón say?"

"That Tía Isabela used to ride into the ring on a horse like your Lusacia; I said she was too fat—Lusacia would break in two!"

"She wasn't fat then, and if you go on eating as you do, little pig, you will be twice as fat before you are half her age," Santiago teased her.

"No, I won't, because I won't lie on a couch and eat chocolate all day," she contradicted. "I only eat meat and the things that make you strong! I've got to be strong, because when I grow up I'm going to do all the things that men do."

"I thought you were going to be a belle of Havana society?"

"Oh, that's just between whiles," she said airily. "Men have much better times than girls, and I shall travel about like a man and seek for adventures. I shall have a house in Spain, and perhaps I'll have one in France as well. Madame Deschamps says Paris is a wonderful city, with the river and islands that people live on, and flower gardens, and the King's palace. Why don't we have a king in Cuba, Papa?"

"The King of Spain is the King of Cuba."

"Well, he never comes here, so what's the use? I think they ought to make you King of Cuba," she confided, as she flung her arms affectionately round her father's neck.

He hugged and set her down rather sharply. Unwittingly, she had placed her finger on the sore spot of his ambition. A man in his position should have held important public office, but his attitude to the Church stood between him and advancement in a country where the Church governed everything.

"Now you can go and put on your riding-dress, and I will take you to Buonaventura. But you will have to come back by yourself, because I am going on to the town to buy slaves."

"More slaves! How many does that make now?"

"We have nearly nine hundred; but some of them are past their use,

and we have got to get trained men to rebuild Buonaventura; the west wing is falling down."

The great plantation, now flourishing, had extended its lands by nearly a third. Everywhere one looked were evidences of prosperity—save only in the house itself, which the old man's stubbornness had kept untouched. It pleased him for some reason to live in squalor in the midst of plenty. Viewing its scaling façade, the dilapidation of its sprawling roofs—the portion destroyed by the storm six years ago had only been patched—Santiago regretted the fact that every year of postponement added to the cost of setting it in order when his father was gone; but filial respect was stronger than mercenary consideration. Here a shored-up wall, there a patched roof showed attempts to keep out the weather—but indoors you could take a knife and dig four inches of mould out of the walls, while small fingers amused themselves by picking hollows in rotted woodwork, and loose planks formed dubious bridging across the holes in the floors.

At least he could let the old man die in peace! Santiago chuckled to remember a three-year-old urchin toddling about the big, neglected rooms with an air of unconscious possession; one of the maidservants suckled a baby and giggled with self-consciousness when regaled with a silver coin to bring luck to the infant. It was all as he remembered it from his childhood—big, feckless, improvident, carelessly benevolent, with strapping half-breed youths 'swaggering about in their masters' cast-off clothing and always a suppressed air of gala that went with the indifference of its owner. There would have to be a clearance when the master was gone; but what did it matter? It only meant the addition of a cabin or two to the growing village, and extra hands to help with the harvests when they came.

The patriarchal feeling lay heavily, yet with a happy heaviness, on Santiago's spirit, as he rode, followed by his daughter and the groom, across the plantation. He loved it, and it, at last, had justified his love. All was peaceful and in order. And his ranch, too—that was more than repaying the outlay he had spent on it. In addition to the inland sales, he was shipping cattle regularly to America—mainly cows, to be crossed with the local strains; they had not done so well with the bull calves, many of whom died on the crossing, while others seemed to deliver up the fire and valour of their temperament to the watery element over which they passed. His mind was full of little but the ranch and plantation, of plans and experiments for the future: and the impatience he had felt when things were going ill had passed into the deep satisfaction of one who 'watches all his schemes coming to fruition. If there had but been a son to carry on!

María Pia trotted gaily by her father's side, taking the liveliest interest in all about her, showing off her knowledge as they rode along.

"That's Otahite—that's criolla; criolla is the prettiest, but it doesn't grow so strong as the other, does it? I don't believe that crop's going to be as good as it was last year."

"You'll be running the plantation when you're as old as I."

"I don't think I should like that, Papa," she said politely. "Perhaps I shan't even be here."

"You must be here." He reined in his horse to look at her, loving the stubborn, lifted chin, the level brows, the strong mouth; as a boy she would

have been handsome. "You have got to remember; there is nobody but you to inherit Buonaventura. Everything will depend on you."

"Tía Lucía's husband owns a plantation, but he never goes near it," she pointed out, with justice.

He snapped his finger and thumb impatiently.

"I know it. But it has never been that way at Buonaventura. First your great-grandfather, then your grandfather, then I, have given our lives to it. The earth knows it and answers; it is grateful. In the earth there is feeling; it loves and gives of its best only to those who love it. You cannot bully the earth!"

"But that's greedy! I don't want to give myself to the earth, Papa!—and I can't go riding about from morning to night, like you do, seeing that gates are mended and fences not fallen down!"

"That is true. You can never be the master of Buonaventura, but it is for you to give it a master, one who will look after it as we have done. Don't forget, *hija mía*, when the time comes, you have got to marry a planter."

The child's brows lowered, her under lip came sullenly forward. At seven years old, thanks to her mother and to Madame Deschamps, María Pía perfectly understood her woman's destiny, but, unlike the majority of her contemporaries, she did not yet accept it. She knew the meaning of marriage: having children, looking after servants and losing the cherished liberty of which she had a great deal more than most little girls of her age.

Thanks to her father's insistence, in which he persisted against the expostulation of her Aunts Isabela and Lucía, she enjoyed, when out of the schoolroom, a freedom nearly equal to that of a boy. She thought of the things she loved best, riding, accompanying Santiago when he fished in the creeks for manatee, romping about—well out of her governess's sight—in bare legs and breeches, dawn expeditions to the forest, where the guns brought the sleepy buzzards toppling out of their trees. None of these things fitted into the conception of marriage which she had formulated through her occasional contacts with her Aunt Isabela's friends.

So she glowered at her father, and, stabbing the spurs into her horse's sides, made the spirited little beast shy past him, and galloped ahead. Chuckling, he followed her; he loved her, he would grant her almost anything. But it was well that she, heiress of Buonaventura, should know, even thus early, the limits of his forbearance.

II

"In the little village of Hato lived two Indian brothers, whose father's name was de Joicos; Rodrigo and Juan de Joicos, they were called, and they sometimes worked in the mines and sometimes they did nothing but row about the bay with a negro boy called Juan Moreno to pull the oars."

María Pía sighed gently and moved her head closer to her mother's on the pillow. There was a sweet scent of Florida water, and the lilac-striped gauze of María Cayetúña's gown was blown by the draught of the fan across the clean starched frock of sprigged cotton to which María Pía had changed

before coming to her mother's room. The heat and the buzzing flies made them both sleepy, and María Cayetuña's voice sank to a drone as she went on with the story.

"One day their father sent them across the bay for a load of salt, and as their boat went over the water, Rodrigo said: 'Do you see something?' At first, when they looked, there was nothing to be seen, but when Juan Moreno laid down the oars and stood up in the boat in order to see farther, he cried out: 'Yes, it is a seabird that has been beaten down by the storm.' And as they thought it might be good to eat, they told the negro to row towards it."

"I know what it was; go on," said María Pía with satisfaction.

"How can you know? I've never told you this story before."

"It was the child Jesus; it's always the child Jesus," said María Pía, politely stifling a yawn.

Laughing softly, María Cayetuña stroked her daughter's cheek.

"Well, for once you are wrong, clever one!" She remembered how, at María Pía's age, she too had begun to learn that most stories ended the same way, and that it was never very interesting. Generally she took pains to spare her daughter this particular form of boredom. "It was a great piece of wood, and on it there was an image of the Virgin, with 'I am the Virgin of Charity' cut in big letters over her head. And if you don't believe me I shall take you and show you next time there is a feast."

"I always believe you, *muñeca* mama," murmured María Pía, fondling the soft, narrow hand with childishly delicate fingers that lingered on her temple. "What little hands you have, Mama! Look, mine is bigger already." She spread out her own, well-shaped and firm as a boy's, the hand, had she but known it, of her English grandfather. "You are just like a little doll; I could pick you up and carry you in my arms."

"But you don't like dolls."

"You are my favourite doll," persisted María Pía, "and I shall always call you *muñeca*, because I do love you so dearly!" She laid her head on her mother's bosom, nuzzling like a little animal into the soft material. "I have got the most lovely little Mama-doll in the world, and I would do anything to please her."

"It is a pity you cannot remember me when I was pretty." She abandoned her fable of Nuestra Señora de la Caridad, picking up the mirror which was often in her hand, in which she sought the ever-lost. The glass gave back a face as tiny and wistful as a child's, the tender skin netted with lines which, at present almost imperceptible, she watched with sadness, knowing they were the forerunners of wrinkles to come. They strove together—she and Madame Deschamps—to keep them at bay; the Frenchwoman, who had developed a deep affection for her employer's wife, bringing all the intricate arts of the toilet, in which she was skilled, to bear on the preservation of that sweet, fading beauty. Such offices brought her often in collision with Doña Vespasiana—little more, in these days, than a gasping, plethoric encumbrance on the household, but savagely jealous of her rival in the regard of one for whom she had never cared. Madame Deschamps was amused, careless, and always the winner in their battles of wits, of which she would remark to María Cayetuña in the other's presence—" *La pauvre dame! Il ne vaut pas la peine*—it is like an elephant teased by a mosquito."

Madame Deschamps was the only person in the household for whom the condesa de Coria had any respect. The cool aloofness of the Frenchwoman, the absolute correctness of her behaviour, her invariably unruffled neatness, kept Isabela—by now nearly as stout as Doña Vespasiana, and fretfully resentful of a state of affairs for which she had only herself to blame—well in her place. María Cayetuña trusted and leaned upon her, and María Pía had a certain amount of healthy awe for one whose qualities she had learnt dimly to respect.

It was several years since María Cayetuña had left off wearing the wig whose maintenance imposed too great a strain on her frail energies. It had even begun latterly to lend something of a *macabre* setting to the worn little face: the springing coils, the impermeable waves forming a contradiction to all that María Cayetuña had grown to be. It was Madame Deschamps who, seeing how the thing exhausted her, suggested delicately that she should replace it by one of the little caps which formerly she had worn only at night—muslin shells, covered with the most delicate embroidery, which, formerly, she had stitched herself, but the emaciated hands were no longer capable of adding more than a few stitches to the material which Madame Deschamps, herself a skilled needlewoman, fashioned and shaped. Padded out by the short wool beneath, they made a halo round her face and lent her the air of a little nun. María Pía had never seen her mother without one of these caps.

"*Muñeca* mama!" María Pía was crooning. "I want to ask you something. I can have it, if you say Yes!"

"What can you have, *hijita*?" She smiled across her daughter's head at the two women who sat in the window—Doña Vespasiana with her head sunk on her bosom in sleep, a trickle of saliva running down her chin, and Madame Deschamps, alertly upright, with a volume of *La Fontaine* in her hand.

"At Buonaventura to-day—Grandpapa gave it me—but Papa said I must ask you before I brought it home with me. Of course, I could keep it at Buonaventura, but that would not be so nice—and it wouldn't be useful either."

"Gently, gently, *ma petite*: you disturb your mother!"

"Well, you know we were saying the other day it is quite time I had a servant of my own, now I am growing so fast, and Susana has to do so much sewing for me, she hasn't time to look after both of us properly."

"Well, but——"

"And Olimpo would soon learn to look after me just as well as Susana!"

"Who is it—Olimpo?"

"She is one of Juanita's children—you know she's got fifteen or sixteen—and Olimpo's nearest my age—and Grandpapa says I can have her if you will let me."

"No—no!"

"Mama, why don't you like the negroes? They are so funny and amusing, and even Papa says they work much better than our creoles."

"They are dirty and bad and low!" Her voice was high and weak with anger; the volume of *La Fontaine* sank gently upon Madame Deschamps'

knee. "Look at the way things are at Buonaventura! It is disgraceful human beings live in such a state."

"Perhaps when one is as old as Grandpapa a little dirt doesn't matter," said María Pía cheerfully. "He likes things that way—and all his negroes are so fond of him; and Olimpo's so young, Mama—if we give her to Susana to be taught she will soon learn the way things are here. We are the only people in Cuba who don't have slaves in the house, Mama; why is it? I keep on asking Papa, but he only says you don't like them."

"Isn't that reason enough?"

"Well, but every one else does. Can't I have Olimpo? She is such a funny little thing; whenever I go to Buonaventura she follows me all over, just like a little dog. And if she doesn't come to us she is going to Tía Isabela's, and she'll have such a horrid time, with Carola to pull her hair!"

"*Tais-toi, ma petite*; that is enough for the present." Madame Deschamps' hand lay on her shoulder, Doña Vespasiana, torn from her slumbers by the crescendo of María Pía's voice, snorted and slapped flies away. "*Qué alboroto, qué malo!*" "We will now have a tisane, and afterwards you can get your veil and I will take you for a walk."

María Pía, who hated walks as much as she loved rides, heard the note of an authority she had learned it was better not to disobey, and scrambled off the bed.

That night Madame Deschamps spoke to Santiago.

"If I may be permitted, monsieur, to make a suggestion?"

"My whole attention, señora, is at your disposal."

"We have already spoken about the confirmation; I think it is time the arrangements were made."

"So the place is to be infested with priests?" He scowled.

She dismissed the priests with a backward wave of her hand. Agnostic in her bones, religion was part of her code of good manners. Santiago envied and a little disliked her; she had a way of making him feel a savage.

"And then there will be masses and confessions, I suppose?"

"What need is there for you to concern yourself with those, monsieur? It will be my duty to conduct the child to church at the proper times. You would not, of course, wish to place her in any situation that would set her apart from her companions."

"What companions has she?" he sneered, struggling to maintain his authority.

"Too few, unfortunately, at present," replied Madame Deschamps candidly. "But it is a state of affairs that will not go on for ever. In fact, I think she herself will take a stand about that before she is very much older. And, in any case, you cannot keep an heiress locked away from all society in a place like this."

He knew that; already casual glances and remarks had warned him that, although it was a little early for matrimonial plans, there would be no lack of suitors for the señorita de Lorcha's hand. He agreed glumly that the girl had better be confirmed; there must be no looks askance at a daughter of the de Lorchas, and if the influence of the Church helped to tighten the bonds of discipline on one who already displayed more than her share of de Lorcha independence, he was not too grand to make use of it. But it would

be a nuisance having a priest about the place; it was only too likely to stir in María Cayetuña those Catholic influences which, during the years of their marriage, he successfully had lulled.

"There is also another matter that claims the attention of her guardians," Madame Deschamps was saying.

"And what is that?" he muttered.

"It would be better, before she is confirmed, that she were told of her heredity."

"She will hear about that soon enough—from the priest!"

"With all deference to monsieur—it is not a matter I should leave to the priest," said Madame Deschamps. "In my experience, very few priests are qualified to deal with matters outside of their religion. It is curious; for one would think, hearing so many confessions, that they would have acquired more of worldly knowledge than is given to the average layman. It seems, however, that they are apt to distort it in the light of their own teaching . . . and these facts, monsieur, are not such as bear distortion, in conveyance to a child of eight years old."

"Well—am I to tell her?"

"I understand your reluctance; in fact, I was prepared for it," said Madame Deschamps, looking at him frankly, "and I will, if you will trust me so far, see to the matter myself. Indeed, I think that will be much better!" She permitted herself a smile. "You see, monsieur, a personal matter of this kind is often better handled by a stranger, to whom the facts in themselves are really of no importance beside the manner in which they are received. We in France are not shocked by a little coloured blood! Our only difficulty lies in understanding the seriousness with which it is regarded here—since human beings remain human, whether their skins are light or dark!"

III

Madame Deschamps rather enjoyed her visits to Buenaventura. She was always amused by the spectacle of unregenerate humanity, and the shamelessness of old Don Pepe's ménage was in agreeable contrast with the creeping, jealous conventions that coated with slime the Havanese households she sometimes visited.

She would even drink chocolate with him: he bringing out his finest manners together with his finest silver, in honour of a woman whose intelligence astonished one whose knowledge of women had invariably stopped short of their intellect; and he was obviously gratified when Madame Deschamps and his granddaughter called on him, the former with the request that she might be permitted to show her pupil the few paintings which the house contained.

"You must have many works of interest, señor—landscapes, family portraits, and so forth, which are valuable to the student of paintings?"

Don Pepe signified, in the usual formula, that the house was hers, and apologized that his physical disabilities made it impossible for him to conduct them. An elderly, beaming negro was deputed to act as cicerone, and Madame Deschamps gathered up her silken skirts—warning her pupil to do the same

—to ascend stairs crusted with immemorable dirt, from whose banisters her fingers, after one fastidious touch, shrank.

There was no shrinking about María Pía. She shrieked with amusement as from those grand, desecrated upper rooms rushed, at the opening of a door, God knows what—children, dogs, hens, scared amorists, a liver-and-white bitch with puppies clinging to her trailing dugs. Madame Deschamps had to make use of her pomander; this was more than she had bargained for.

The pictures were almost invisible under their centuries' grime: blackened histories of martyrdoms, inferior landscapes, saints with upturned, rolling eyes, hung cheek by jowl with crucifixes across whose extended arms spiders had spun their webs and left them to be coated with dust. The place, in fact, had never been swept since Isabela went out of it, and Santiago fled to his ranch-house from the spectacle of so much dirt and discomfort.

She did not at first find that which she sought.

"Is there no painting of your mistress—of Don Pepe's wife?"

"*Si, si, señora!*" Grinning, the man led the way to what must, Madame Deschamps felt, have been the nuptial chamber; tattered draperies hung from the tester of a vast high bed, at whose uncovered mattress mice had evidently been nibbling; their droppings were all over the ticking, and their sweetish, musty smell pervaded the air. María Pía stared round her with interest.

"I've never been in here before."

Even with the shutters opened, the painting was almost obliterated by its layers of grime.

"Fetch a cloth—and damp it before you bring it."

A plump, chocolate-box face looked through the streaks of black—a Cuban painter's ideal of feminine beauty, probably as little like its original as Doña Mercédes de Lorcha resembled the granddaughter who stood, round-eyed, gazing up at it. The portrait, as usual in contemporary works of art, was subordinated to the painter's interest in the elaborations of costume.

"Who is it?"

"That is your father's mother: your grandmother," explained Madame Deschamps carefully.

"What a funny way her hair is done; and her eyes look like marbles," observed María Pía. "Where is she? Why haven't I seen her?"

"Because she was dead before you were born—like your other grandmother: your mother's mother."

"Isn't she Mama's mother as well?"

"No, but she is the mother of your Aunt Isabela, your father's sister." Better to be painstaking about these relationships.

"Then do I have two grandmothers?" asked María Pía.

"Everybody has two grandmothers, and two grandfathers as well."

"Yes—there's Grandpapa—and I know about the other one as well. He was an English *grande* and the pirates killed him," said María Pía, proud to show off her family knowledge. "And he lived in England at a place called Bristol"—she placed the accent, in the Spanish fashion, on the last syllable. "Doesn't it smell funny in here? I don't think Grandmama was very pretty; shall we go into the garden?"

"I shall be very glad to do so," said Madame Deschamps, thinking that

her plan was working out satisfactorily; she must now keep the erratic little mind to the subject of grandparents. "It is a great pity that your grandmother—I mean, the one in the painting—died before you were born. Old people are very interesting; she could have told you much about the country and the people in it when she was a little girl."

They were sitting on one of the battered marble seats, María Pía swinging her feet under her gown and pulling occasional faces at her satellite Olimpo, who, her stiff plaits bristling and eyes rolling with adoration, had followed them from room to room and now dodged in and out of sight among the overgrown degenerate shrubs of wild heliotrope which, with its companion mignonette, made sweetness of the soft, golden evening air. The usual couples loitered in the tracks that had once been paths, the air of Buonaventura was the air of liberty and cheerful idleness, no discipline ruffled the timeless indolence of Don Pepe's household staff, who looked with scornful pity upon the land-workers and boasted of their own advantages.

"Some of the young girls are very beautiful," observed Madame Deschamps. "Look at that one—how splendidly she carries her head; it is like a caryatid."

"That's Chipre." María Pía did not know or care about caryatides. "She's going to marry Salomon soon; I shall ask Papa if I can go to the wedding."

"Do you see how beautiful her skin is? It is almost like velvet; and her wrists and ankles are as small as yours. Your other grandmother," said Madame Deschamps casually, "was like that."

The child looked startled.

"Like Chipre?" But there was no shock; the wise governess was sure of it. It was no more than the approach of past generations, which, taking place twice in afternoon, stirred María Pía's awareness of her small self as a link in the eternal human chain. "Was she black?"

"Yes. That is not so very odd, is it? Olimpo, and Chipre, and Carola and the rest—they think and feel just the same as we do, although they are dark and we are fair. There is an amusing story which the Moorish people tell. They say that when God created mankind He made them in three batches—like bread; and the first batch was baked too long, and those were the negroes. The second batch was not baked long enough, and came out pale—those were the white people. But the third batch was baked just the right length of time, and it was the brown Moors. You see, all the bread was the same in the beginning——" She stopped; to her alarm there were tears in María Pía's eyes. "*Qu'est ce que c'est, ma chérie?—Pourquoi pleurs-tu?*" She gathered the child closer to her side. Had she bungled it after all?

"Was Grandmama beaten—like Olimpo and Chipre get beaten by Roques with his big stick?"

"*Jamais, jamais.* You have not understood, my little one—these are slaves; your grandmother was not a slave." She had been; but there are degrees of slavery, and how explain those to a child of seven?

"I thought all negroes were slaves." The outrage of a governing race was in the child's voice. It was probably the first time that María Pía had ever thought of the negroes among whom she had been raised as her inferiors, but this close personal application of the black races to her own family life had roused the instinct which had lain dormant so far.

"That is because you have only seen them here and in Havana, doing work that white people think it is beneath their dignity to do. But in their own country some of them are kings and queens, and have as many people to wait upon them as you have here at Buonaventura."

"Why do they come here, then?"

"Because they are captured by their enemies and sold to the people who make their living by supplying labour to the plantations."

"How they must hate it!"

"Well, it is better than falling victim to the savages of their own land," said Madame Deschamps easily.

"Do you think Chipre is a queen?" María Pía's eyes were fixed curiously on the beautiful, vase-like form of the young negress whom Madame Deschamps had chosen deliberately for her demonstration.

"No, because Chipre was born here in Cuba; she has never known any life but that of a slave."

"Was Grandmama a queen?"

"I don't know," said Madame Deschamps, thinking that with a pupil of María Pía's temperament it was better not to commit herself so far.

"I shall ask Mama!" Already the tears were gone, the eyes sparkling.

Now came the difficult part.

"It is better, *ma petite*, that you do not talk about her to your mother," said Madame Deschamps carefully. "You see, when she was born, your grandmother died—died, do you understand, having her baby."

"Like Perla!" nodded María Pía, who knew all about such things.

"So it makes your mother very sad, for she had to grow up all alone, without a mother's care." Might such not be the case of the child to whom she was speaking? The realistic Frenchwoman had long realized that María Cayetuña's languor was the gradual seeping away of a life which had no resistance to the circumstances by which it was surrounded, a physical and spiritual anæmia which had set in, probably, soon after the first raptures of love had ended. It was she only who had sensed the profound wistfulness of one torn by the roots from all its familiar associations, and although the hand that uprooted had been passionately loving, the roughness of the operation had disturbed for ever the delicate metabolism of the plant. "It is a pity," she often thought, "that he will not allow her access to her religion. It is like starvation."

"Is *that* why we don't have negroes at home."

"Of course."

"Then Mama doesn't hate negroes—they only make her sad."

There was an inexplicable relief in María Pía's voice—the relief of a child who has solved a mystery which has tormented it.

"If you are good, you shall some day have a ring that belonged to your grandmother," said Madame Deschamps cautiously. Santiago had shown it to her—with what motive it were difficult to say; it had come to María Cayetuña in a sealed packet after the Abbess's death, and she had flung it in a passion across the room. He had picked it up and kept it, out of curiosity; a souvenir of "*la bellissima negra*"—who, had she lived, would have been his mother-in-law.

"Is it pretty?" María Pía had inherited to the full her mother's love of jewellery.

"It is just plain gold—with a Latin inscription inside which some day you must learn to read. When you wear it with the snake's head inside your palm, it might almost be a wedding-ring. It is, in fact, the ring with which your grandmother was married."


"*Buena suerte*—no? I shall wear it for luck," said María Pía, grinning up at her governess.

Her hand in that of Madame Deschamps, she skipped along with perfect gaiety to say farewell to her grandfather. Madame Deschamps drew a long breath. So the great moment had come—and gone: as lightly as a gust of wind. She was too wise a woman to believe that it would always be thus throughout the child's life. Ahead lay humiliations, mortification, bitterness and wounded pride, but those were mercifully hidden from the little girl upon whom she looked with a kindness that held nothing of sentimentality. With riches such as de Lorcha's daughter would presently enjoy, such trials would, no doubt, be reduced to a minimum, for wealth commands a deference which is denied even to those of untainted blood.

She would have to say a little more, perhaps, to suggest to the child that she should not prattle about her new discovery; but that could wait for later. She would not, for the present, disturb by the shadow of a leaf that perfect light-heartedness.

María Pía's last words, however, as they reached the house, did not make wholly for reassurance.

"Whether Grandmama was a queen or not," she said, and paused to put out her tongue as a last farewell to the hovering Olimpo, "I shall be a queen some day: Queen of Buonaventura!"



CHAPTER XV

I

DURING the course of the next five or six years, María Pía de Lorcha shot upwards with the vigour of a young sugar cane, and her ideas strengthened with the strength of her active body.

She had violent loves, violent hates; her loves were her father, her delicate little mother, whose increasing fragility was the only cloud upon a radiant adolescence, and her horses, which she rode as though she had been born in the saddle. Her hatred was reserved in the main for her Aunt Isabela, whose continued interference she resisted with an insolence that drew the stern reprimands of Madame Deschamps.

"Can you not see that it is you, and not your aunt, who are lowered by such rudeness? Besides, it only gives her an excuse to lay complaints against you with your father."

"Papa knows Tía Isabela!" scornfully rejoined María Pía.

"She is right that you are shamefully neglectful of your social duties."

"*Qué disparate!* What social duties have I out here?" mocked María Pía.

"You can at least be in when your Aunt Lucía and your cousins call. You knew that they were coming, and it was wrong of you to go off to the ranch with your father."

María Pía flung back her head and laughed uproariously.

"Did you ever see anything so fat and soft and stupid as those Montalba children? Juan-María is two years older than I, and he can't ride properly, and Leonor thinks about nothing but clothes and how to coax presents out of people." She placed her hands on her narrow hips, threw back her shoulders and thrust forward her stomach with an indescribable insolence.

"I do not ask for presents; I give them—I!"

"There is no need for you to stand like a *montera!*"

"I'd sooner associate with the *monteros* than with my Havanese cousins! They at least talk about the important things—how to make the land yield, and what the sun and the moon do to the crops, and why the prices go up and down, and raising the working stock! Those are the things which will be important to me when I am mistress of Buonaventura. Of course, my husband will be the master; but I'm not going to let him do as he likes about everything without consulting me. After all, it's *my* land, and I have the right to know everything that's going on."

"*Ma chère*, you will certainly make a very curious impression if you carry your *montero* talk into society," sighed Madame Deschamps.

There was no lack of company in these days at the ranch-house; scornful and sceptical society, which at first turned up its nose at these *nouveaux riches* de Lorchas, soon realized that a creole fortune was there for the snatching. The condesa was indefatigable in her efforts to procure a good match for her niece, and seldom a day went by without the arrival of coaches, or of cavaliers on horseback, anxious to stake their claims where the heiress was concerned.

But the heiress was sceptical, nor was she, from the Cuban point of view, prepossessing. All Madame Deschamps's efforts so far had failed to make of her a drawing-room ideal; her cold, hard stare stripped men of their self-confidence when she was barely thirteen. It was generally said that her husband would pay dearly for the acquisition of the de Lorcha lands and fortune.

And yet with her mother she was all tenderness. A series of miscarriages had made of María Cayetuña a bedridden invalid, and when, nearly ten years after María Pía's birth, she was delivered of a stillborn child, it was thought she could not live. María Pía nursed her with an incredible devotion. It was hardly to be believed that the rough, hardy little girl had in her such resources of gentleness and self-sacrifice. She who adored the vivid outdoor life shut herself for hours on end in the dark, airless room of the invalid, would suffer no one else to perform the intimate service care of the sick woman demanded. Only from Madame Deschamps would she accept advice, and no one but the Frenchwoman was permitted by María Pía to cross her mother's threshold. And only when María Cayetuña was out of danger did she turn, with a loving kindness that was almost maternal, to Santiago, heartbroken at the destruction, once more, of his dearest hope.

"Papa, did they show you my little brother? Ay, how perfect he was—just like a little waxen image. Poor little Papa, I am so sorry for you! But look—am I not as good as any son?"

She stood up straight before him, clenching her small, brown fists. It was evident that it had never occurred to her that, if the baby had lived, she would have been done out of her inheritance: or that this was a contingency that might have arisen any time during the last ten years. She had always looked on herself as heiress of Buonaventura; it was as Buonaventura's heiress that she had given royal welcome to the little brother, and mourned the playmate who would have been content to receive all benefits, all honours, from an elder sister's hand.

Santiago strangled his sobs as he embraced her, and that night rode to Havana, where he had a long private conversation with a friend who made an amateur study of medicine, and, subsequently, visited his lawyer. It was, alas, certain that María Cayetuña would bear him no more children.

"You should take a house in Havana!" The condesa scolded him when he called at the Aroche palace—not because it gave him pleasure to do so, but because habits are difficult to break. In the old days to have visited Havana without calling on Isabela would have been unthinkable to both; the day lit up around those moments when they both were together. He now went in dully, in performance of his duty. "That girl of yours is running wild, in spite of the governess; and if it is your wife you are thinking of—it is easier to get a doctor here in the town than out where you are in the country!"

Asunción Gamborena, who was also there, added her persuasions to those of the condesa. Santiago was much older, grave and absent, often, in his manner; but he had been her lover for several years. If he had no desire for fresh adventure, he might care to resume the old one—especially as it was not natural for a man with a sick wife wholly to abstain from women. Asunción was clever and discreet, but her cunning did not avail her.

María Pía, when told of her aunt's suggestion, laughed her harsh, insolent young laughter.

"Go to Havana? *Vaya*, Papa! That would mean having her with us at each hour of the day. No, Papa *mio*: for all her meddling with our arrangements, Mama and I are still the mistresses of your household, and I have something better to do than be a watchdog, to keep Tía Isabela off the doorstep!"

The servants adored her, although she made much work for them; she was prodigal in her untidiness, was never punctual for meals, and would send them running on errands a dozen times a day. Madame Deschamps wondered sometimes whether she had made a failure of her training; yet the girl had such excellent qualities, had so much essential good in her disposition, it was difficult to act with her like a jailer. She was shocked by creole wastefulness, that María Pía had inherited in an extravagant degree—wastefulness of time, of material, of effort; and she tried in vain to check the girl's generosity, that heaped gifts upon her.

"*Qué disparate!* What is the use of being rich, unless one can give presents to people?"

There was a time when the house seemed continually to be filled with people who had things to sell—when María Cayetuña and her daughter laughed like children over unimaginable extravagances; while dark men with noses like the bills of hawks spread carpets, unrolled bales of silks, set clocks in ormolu, with painted porcelain faces, a-chime for their benefit, opened caskets with silver strappings across panels of rose-coloured velvet, to reveal strings of amber, cut-glass bottles decorated with sprays of gilt flowers, whose released stoppers liberated attars that made María Pía cry out with ecstasy, and turned the pages of books whose rich engravings kept them entertained for hours.

During those years luxury went crawling through the house, diminishing something of its pure grace, replacing unconscious good taste with conscious bad taste, breaking the perfection of proportion and line with rococo eruptions in gilt and mirror-glass. Gabriel would not have exclaimed with pleasure upon the room he came into, if he had visited the ranch-house when María Pía was thirteen or fourteen years old. Madame Deschamps concealed her wry smiles; it was not, after all, her place to control the taste of her employers.

She could, however, insist upon her pupil's paying attention to her studies, and these continued, despite María Pía's occasional scowling protests that literature and history were a great waste of time. The one subject in which, however, she took pleasure was geography; maps fascinated her; her childish avowal that she would be a traveller when she grew up took form in other aspirations. "I shall go to Europe when I am older. Leonor de Montalba is always boasting that her father came from the Peninsular, and I shall just go and find out whether Madrid is any grander than Havana! And then I shall visit England and see where Grandfather lived—at Bristol. What a nuisance—that means I'll have to learn English, doesn't it? Do you know any English, *madame?*"

"I know 'Ah duyú do' and 'Goo'-bay,'" said Madame Deschamps, smiling. "They are not very useful phrases. English pronunciation is barbarous—the English never use their lips, they force the sounds from the backs of their throats."

María Pía was rummaging among the very few books the house contained; they were flung into a cupboard which, from time to time, Madame Deschamps tidied, and her pupil set in disorder.

"I remember a book that once—when I was a little girl—Rosario said was English. How should she know? And how should it be here?" She dragged out a small brown volume with a title—unintelligible to both—in gilt. "Is this it? But look! There is a name inside." She spelt out the syllables painstakingly. "Gab-ri-el Flo-od. Flood? But that was Grandfather's name, wasn't it?"

Madame Deschamps had not spent ten years in the island without making herself mistress of the island gossip.

"Yes," she said slowly. "That must have been your Cousin Gabriel, from Barbados, who visited Cuba in the year you were born."

"From Barbados? Then he was not English?"

"Yes, he was English; his father was English, and came from Bristol. The family settled in the West Indies somewhere about the middle of the century."

"Do you mean he came here and stayed in this house?"

"That is what I have been told."

The information clearly fascinated María Pía, whose curiosity, as her governess knew, could be trusted to ferret out the rest of the history. Certainly the de Lorchas were an awkward family! There was so much of their past which was difficult to explain to a girl of fourteen.

"Stayed *here*!" María Pía was repeating, as if she could hardly credit it. "But I have never even heard of a Gabriel Flood; neither Papa nor Mama have ever mentioned him. And Mama so proud of her English relations! Isn't that very odd?"

"He came to a very sad end," said Madame Deschamps carefully. She knew she was one of the few people on the island who did not accept the tradition of the señora de Lorchas's liaison with her cousin. "He was here, you know, at the times of the slaves' risings, which you have heard your grandfather talk about——"

"When Papa shot up all the Buonaventura slaves? You know, that always seems to me fantastical."

"It was no doubt a very difficult time for him; Don Pepe still controlled the plantation, and his overseers had nearly as much power as your father. That was the time, you know, when the house was burned down and the poor López family met their awful fate. You have heard all about that."

"It sounds like a made-up story, doesn't it? You couldn't fancy our slaves rebelling now!" The pride of Buonaventura's heiress sounded plainly in the girl's voice.

"Those were bad days," said Madame Deschamps, "and your Cousin Gabriel paid the price of them; for he was killed—some people believe it was an accident—by one of the negroes, here, almost at your door."

María Pía drew a sharp breath through her teeth; her dark eyes, widening, were fixed on her dueña's with an expression of almost uncanny understanding.

"Ah—now I begin to see!" she breathed. "I see why Mama hates the negroes. Long ago, when I was little, you told me a sentimental story about losing her mother when she was born; you said she didn't hate slaves, they only made her sad. I've known for a long time that that wasn't true. It seemed so strange that a gentle little thing like my Mama should hate anybody, most of all people who had done her no harm; but, of course, now I understand. You should have explained it before."

"Listen, *mon enfant*; no one has told you of these matters because it is a painful subject for your parents; but it is time you learned facts and how to be discreet about them. Down there, in the garden, your cousin is buried. There is nothing to mark his grave; I am not quite sure where it is, except that I have heard it is somewhere near the big palms——"

"*Caramba*, so that's why the negroes won't go down that way after dark! I've heard them saying there's a ghost there—you know how foolish they are about things like that. So it's true after all?"

"As far as ghosts go, it is certainly not true. Your Catholic training forbids you to believe in ghosts," said Madame Deschamps severely.

"I wish I could read this book," pouted María Pía, changing the subject. "It has pictures in it: what odd-looking houses——!"

II

"Mama, do you want to see Tía Lucía? She is here, with that stupid, fat Leonor!"

"But yes! You know I always want to see your Aunt Lucía. But you will keep Leonor downstairs, will you not? It tires me to talk to too many people all together." María Cayetuña's lips curved as she asked this favour of her daughter, who went scowling to perform a duty she detested. Why did Aunt Lucía always have to trail her children with her? If it was not Juan-María it was Ramón, and if it was not Ramón it was Leonor; sometimes all three of them! It was a mystery to María Pía how Aunt Lucía, of whom she was quite fond in a careless, half-patronising fashion, should have produced three such completely idiotic children as her Montalba cousins.

"How are you, *amigita mia*? They have been telling me all sort of things about you." The marquesa leaned compassionately over María Cayetuña's pillow, to brush back the fringe of lace which had drooped across the sick woman's brows. "Not that I pay attention to a word Isabela says! Your eyes are more beautiful than ever; I suppose Santiago tells you that every day of your life?"

"Don't let's talk about me. How happy and well you look, Lucía. Sit down here, beside me, and give me all your news."

"*Madre mia*, there's plenty of news!" Lucía settled herself comfortably in the rocking-chair, throwing back the mantilla which, at a sign from María Cayetuña, Madame Deschamps came forward to unpin. The Frenchwoman and her employer exchanged understanding glances.

"Madame!" She spoke to Doña Vespasiana. "I think this is the hour when the dressmaker said she would be here; there was something, some bodice, was there not, you wished her to arrange?"

"Yes, indeed," put in María Cayetuña, as Doña Vespasiana—who hated being dismissed when there was company—grumbled and demurred. "Don't forget, it will soon be Holy Week, and you must have your crimson brocade put in order. Don't you remember? Last time it was laced the stuff split all down the back!"

The two ladies smothered their giggles, almost as in the old days at Santa Clara, as Doña Vespasiana, followed, with the air of a watchdog, by Madame Deschamps, waddled petulantly from the room.

"*Cette bonne* Deschamps! I do not know what we should do without her."

"What luxury to be together!" cried the marquesa, picking up María Cayetuña's hand to kiss the fingers lightly. "And, oh, to think of the years we wasted because I was a stupid little coward and in awe of Isabela! You are an angel, you know, to forgive me for that."

"When I see you sitting beside me now there is nothing to forgive," was the gentle answer.

"At least you can't reproach me any longer with being too young to talk to!" The marquesa fluttered her fan. "Tell me: has marrying Santiago been all you dreamed and hoped for?"

"All that, and more. I cannot tell you how much more good he is to me than I deserve."

"That's rubbish; you have been an angel of a wife. I wondered, you know, at one time, how it was going; Santiago has such a strong will—like all the de Lorchas—and must have things always his own way; and you—" She broke off tactfully, arching her brows.

"Yes, I know what you mean; I was violent and headstrong, wasn't I? That was because I was always fighting against something; but when there is no longer anything to fight against—? It was like being shut up in stone walls, and then, after Santiago came, the stone walls disappeared: they became curtains of silk. I wasn't so well, either, after my first baby was born; and Santiago was so good, so gentle, so loving—oh, Lucía, no woman could deserve such a husband as mine!"

"How lucky you are. So few women are able to love their husbands. Not that it's that way in my case; Miguel and I get on very well—very well indeed; and you know, before I could come and visit you, he used to bring me plenty of news of you, through Santiago. Yes, Miguel is a very satisfactory husband, and now he has made such a great friend of Caridad Aranda, everything is very easy and pleasant at home. You know, I can't think why women have such a great objection to their husbands' women friends; of course, in the first two or three years it would be an insult, but later on, naturally, one wants a little change. How do you feel about it?" concluded Lucía breathlessly.

"*Amiga*, I don't know!" María Cayetuña's eyes twinkled between their heavy lids. "I haven't had any experience."

"Do you mean Santiago has never—? But that's too romantic."

"Do you know of any one? You would be more likely to know than I," was the humble answer.

"Nobody, upon my honour!" Lucía crossed herself solemnly. "I would never lie to you. No; you once said he would have no more mistresses after he had you, and, upon my soul, I think it must be true. Isabela would never have held her tongue about it!"

"Do you see much of Isabela?"

"As much as I can endure." The marquesa grimaced. "Do you remember how fascinated I was by her when Diego married her? All that's quite gone; in fact, Isabela is such a bore with her intrigue, intrigue, I have hardly patience to listen to her. It's always the same old story: marry this one to that one, make this one suspicious and that one jealous—it's grown to be a mania with her. You know, you'd better keep your eye on María Pía: unless you've got some very definite plans of your own, Isabela's claws will be into her!"

"Don't you know my María Pía better than that?" smiled María Cayetuña.

"Oh, well, I know how it is with Leonor," Lucía pouted. "I sometimes feel as if the child isn't my own. The worst is, the silly girl has quite an admiration for Isabela—of course, it's very good for a girl to have the entry at all Isabela's receptions; but we had almost fixed a marriage for her with the youngest Aroche boy, and Leonor was quite pleased about it herself, until her Aunt Isabela cut in and said it wouldn't do, it wouldn't do at all! But now," said Lucía with satisfaction, "at last, I've got even with her!"

"What has happened?"

"There is talk of our going to Spain. You know the state things are in over there—the king seems to have no power, and the queen's favourite, Godoy, is making himself more and more unpopular with the nobility. And then there's the French situation! I don't understand much about it, but it seems the Montalbas have always been noted for their devotion to the crown, so they've sent for Miguel."

"And this means I have got to do without you!" The words came slowly, with loving, lingering regret.

"Shall you really miss me?" The marquesa's large eyes filled with the instant, responsive tears.

"How could it be otherwise? You are all I've got that belongs to the old days; when I talk to you I don't have to keep stopping to explain, and we have all our own old jokes——"

"Like the time you pinned Sister María Mercedes's veil to the curtains!" Lucía went off into a rocket of mirth. "Shall you ever forget that?"

"It wouldn't have been so funny," gasped María Cayetuña, in the midst of her weaker laughter, "if Sister María Mercedes hadn't always started off with such a rush whenever she was going to do anything."

"And the cap was twitched right off her head, and, oh, do you remember? There was a great big mole, like a mouse, just behind her left ear!"

"And we all called her Ratón from that day. Oh dear, how wicked we were!"

"Well, you know how slowly these things move," said the marquesa, when they had finished laughing. "It may be a year, or even two, before we actually get away; Miguel holds so many offices here, and they have got to find him a place about the Court before he will give up his work in Cuba. Can you see me as a Court lady?"

"Yes, indeed; very well."

"Isabela is furious! It seems Diego might have gone, except for—except for——" Lucía broke into a stammer, blushing all over her face.

"Go on; you know you can say anything to me."

"Oh well, creoles are not looked on very favourably at the Spanish court. Besides, you know, hurried on Lucía, "Isabela's conduct has really been a scandal for years. Oh, she's been very clever about it, and never done anything to put herself outside society, but, when you come to think of it, it's quite a scandal she and Diego haven't had any children! Of course she makes out it's Diego's fault, but I can tell you there's plenty of gossip about it, and if all they say is true"—Lucía lowered her voice to an important and scandalized murmur—"Isabela's behaviour is a disgrace to any Catholic."

While this conversation went on above, María Pía and her guest sat in the

garden, staring resentfully at each other (Leonor, who now looked upon herself as a full-fledged young lady, objected to exclusion from the society of her elders), and exchanging the strained remarks that pass between people who heartily dislike each other, but are constrained by adult exhortation to be polite.

"Don't you know the Incláns, the Ferroblancos, the Gamborenas?" Leonor was chattering, to show off her knowledge of society before her country cousin. "Those are the really smart people in Havana!"

"Smart people are a bore."

"I'm surprised your father doesn't take a house in Havana. Everybody does! Aren't they doing anything about getting you a husband?"

"I'll get myself a husband!" shouted María Pía, her endurance breaking down. "When and how I choose!"

"You don't mean you'll just meet somebody and go off and marry him?" Primly horrified, Leonor pursed her lips. "That's what the negroes do!"

"Exactly. And why shouldn't I do the same?"

"Why not indeed?" The words seemed to burst from the other girl's lips, a glitter of malice, for once unconcealed, shone in her round, dark eyes.

"If you think I'm ashamed of my grandmama——!"

"María Pía de Lorcha!" Leonor sprang to her feet, her face all pink and quivering; she looked this way and that, as though seeking a means of escape

"What's the matter now?"

"Don't you know we're forbidden to speak of such things?" quavered Leonor, looking as if she might cry at any minute. "Oh—here's Tío Santiago!" she cried, on a note of relief.

The short, broad figure of Santiago appeared on the porch; his dark face, turned towards the sunset, had a proud handsomeness, there was pride in the carriage of his head. Attractive as he had been in his youth, there was a savour about his present appearance that was even more compelling. He had developed the slight embonpoint of the *bon viveur*, his leisurely gesture, as he tapped the ash from his cigar, contained all the essence of satisfaction with himself, his life and his circumstances. From beneath his lowered lids his eyes possessed, with love and pride, the broad, cultivated brazas of his demesne.

He smiled and came down towards the two girls.

"*Olá, Papa,*" said María Pía casually, and sauntered away to pick flowers.

... She had gathered quite a bouquet, when it flashed into her mind that the two by the porch were enjoying themselves very much. She straightened her back, and stood, looking incredulously at them. Santiago was laughing, and holding out his hand, and Leonor was pretending to tell his fortune. Her coquettish gestures, the brilliant and languishing glances of her eyes, were evidently not lost on Santiago, who wore the gratified, slightly fatuous expression of an elderly man to whom a pretty young girl is showing marked attention

With astonishment that quickened to burning resentment, María Pía strode back; she glared at her father.

"What are you doing, Papa? You don't think Leonor knows anything about fortunes, do you?" she demanded scornfully.

Santiago withdrew his hand, looking a little foolish.

"It was only a game," he admitted.

"And I should think Aunt Lucía is wondering what has become of you," she stabbed viciously at Leonor. Suddenly her rage rose, and before the elder girl could anticipate her action, she slammed the bouquet full in Leonor's face. "You had better take her those, and tell her the sooner she finds you a dueña the better!"

The flowers fell and scattered, Leonor screamed, then, with a scared look, as though her former horror had revived, she gathered up her petticoats and fled up the steps. Even so, she was not to be prevented from turning, at the top, to bestow a backward ceillade at her uncle by courtesy.

Santiago chuckled, while he wagged his head in feigned reprobation. The motive of María Pía's outrageous action was transparent, and, from a man's point of view, it is always amusing to rouse jealousy.

"What an idiot Leonor is! She thinks she's so beautiful, everybody must fall in love with her!"

"It is the right of every woman to be persuaded of her charms." Santiago mischievously eyed his daughter.

"Charms! Papa, she's as fat as a pig! And—and she'd flirt with her grandfather!"

"*Muchas gracias, hija mia,*" said Santiago ironically.

"Well, I never met such a bore in my life," scowled María Pía.

"*Oiga.*" He took her arm easily. "You must learn to be more subtle when you disparage your own sex," said Santiago, as he led his daughter into the house.

Something flashed across her mind which had been there, teasing in the background, for many weeks. She dropped her petulant and childish air, and clutched Santiago's arm.

"Papa, I think you ought to let Mama see the priest."

He took it like a hit in the stomach; his jaw dropped, his handsome face was almost ludicrously blank as he turned it towards her. A moment ago he had been the pleasantly cynical parent, patronizing an impudent chit who was not even aware of the sexual basis of her own jealousy: now he was the guilty schoolboy, with a girl of fourteen as his preceptor.

"Eh?"

She repeated her words exactly, keeping her eyes fixed on his.

"Does she ask for it?"

"No. But you know that not making your confession and not going to mass doesn't stop one's being a Catholic. Mama is still a Catholic, and it will soon be Good Friday. The day of the Resurrection is supposed to be a day of joy for everybody, and I don't think you have a right to keep Mama's share from her."

"What are you saying? When have I ever denied her happiness? *You* know—you above all—that the whole of my life is dedicated to her happiness."

María Pía nodded her head.

"I know. And she would never ask, because she loves you so much she would be afraid to hurt your feelings. But I think she longs to make her confession before Easter Sunday. She knows Madame Deschamps and I are going, and Don Emiliano is coming to hear Doña Vespasiana hers."

"Your mother is too sick," muttered Santiago, "to be pestered with priests."

María Pía moistened her lips

"Perhaps she is too sick, Papa, not to be pestered with them."

His eyes widened to a look of panic.

"Who has been saying it?"

She laid her hand over his and gripped it like a man's.

"So long as you want me, Papa, I will never leave you."

He cast his look of terror over her, then, with a smothered exclamation, went quickly away.

CHAPTER XVI

I

It was the first time since her early childhood that María Pía had missed the Good Friday processions: the great images that went rocking through the streets, on the platforms beneath whose valances staggered and sweated the bearers, whose flat, bare feet and ragged trouser-legs were visible now and again between the heavy crimson curtains and the cobbles; the priests whose little brushes swished the watchful multitudes with the holy water, the acolytes swinging their perfumed censers, and the mysterious, terrifying files of penitentes, with the wax from the thick brown candles rolling down upon their gloved hands, glueing them together in the attitude of repentance. She had gathered from whispers that one of those high-pointed hoods, that, descending to the shoulders, blotted out all but the eyes that burned through the circular holes over the eyesockets, concealed Uncle Diego; on the balcony of the Palacio Aroche she had sat, breathless with excitement, between the blazing stars and the golden smoke of the candle, while the processions streamed by, and Tía Isabela's friends crowded the rooms behind her, and the atmosphere of greeting and merriment seemed curious, in contrast with the penitential scene below.

Not, however, that the Cubans made heavy weather of their penitence. During the course of the evening there would always be half a dozen at least of young men who, leaving their candles in the hall, and pulling off their cagoules, leapt cheerfully up the stairs and into the *sala*, to slake the thirst induced by devotion with the wines the condesa provided for her guests. The spectacle of Carlos, Pedro, or Federico in sackcloth never failed to evoke applause from the enraptured ladies, and the condesa's Good Friday reception (which, of course, was called nothing of the sort, and over which every one was scrupulous in throwing a veil of improvisation) was one of the most brilliant social functions of the year. It may be taken for granted it was never graced by the conde; he, as his wife contemptuously remarked, would go on tramp, tramp, tramping through the streets as long as there was an inch of wax to burn! It is as little to be doubted that full advantage of the penitente garb was taken, to gain access to houses where the presence of its wearer might have been regarded as, to say the least, indiscreet. Yes, Good Friday was a merry night for the ladies of Havana.

She was sorry to miss it all: for this year she was certainly old enough to have taken her full share in the festivities which, starting with that night, rose to their climax on Easter Sunday. There was to be a corrida: "*Cuatro hermosos y escogidos toros de la ganadería de Lorcha*"—she had helped at their selection; she was crazy with anxiety that they should uphold the dignity of their breeder. But she would not leave María Cayetuña.

She tiptoed gently across the room, to look at the sleeping face with the look of childlike peace upon it. *Dios mío*, what a day it had been for María Cayetuña! Her eyes filling with tears, María Pía turned aside, to touch the

vases of white flowers which she had arranged before the priest's arrival, to give the room a gay, a festal air. The little ivory Madonna looked down quietly from her wall-bracket, upon the table on which they had spread the white linen cloth, bordered with deep lace; on Sunday, yes, on Easter Sunday itself, Don Emiliano had promised, at the conclusion of the masses at the Merced, to ride out and celebrate the mass for them here. And now her mother lay sleeping, in the deep peace that was the aftermath of confession.

The house was very quiet, for nearly all the servants were in Havana, and they had actually succeeded in packing Doña Vespasiana off to her relations for the week-end! The shutters held out the sun, but sent heat into the room from their heat-impregnated panels, the flies buzzed, and presently María Pía dozed.

It was twilight when she opened the shutters upon the soft, blue-green evening. A delicious air crept over the grass; leaning her elbows on the window-sill, she allowed it to steal into the open bosom of her gown, tilting her chin and half closing her eyes, to savor the sweet, gay, holiday feeling which had cleared the gardens of the labourers and brought silence on the household.

Her mother's voice made her start.

"What are you looking at, little daughter?"

"Ay, Mama, I did not know you were awake!" She turned and smiled lazily towards the bed.

"I've only just wakened up. Ay, what a beautiful sleep I've had!"

"But you look wonderful!" The girl approached the bedside with an air of relief and happy surprise. "Why, Mama, you look like you used to look when I was a little girl—all soft and warm and golden, like a plum! I believe you are better!" There was a quiver of joyful incredulity in her voice, as she sank to her knees and laid her head on María Cayetúña's pillow.

"You haven't told me what you were looking at." María Cayetúña's hand touched the strong, springing hair

"Only at the garden. This is a beautiful place, Mama; I wouldn't live anywhere else for anything in the world." Having seen that her mother wanted nothing, she returned to the window, and looked over that garden which, a decade before, little more than a pleasant, haphazard vista of lawns and trees, was now patterned with myrtle-bordered parterres, with small paved walks and flights of steps ending in tiny rotundas whose centre was the little fountain or lily-pool through which the fish wove their silver way. An orangery ran the length of a sunny terrace, and the pale globes of lemon and lime gleamed through the arches of pergolas that dripped a perpetual sweetness of syringa. The duckpond was now a formal lake, on which María Pía had sailed her favourite toys—the exquisite model galleons which she had collected instead of dolls when she was a little girl.

"Perhaps you will have to live at Buonaventura later—when you grandfather is dead."

María Pía pouted.

"Then I shall make Papa give the villa to me, for my holiday house. We shall have to do all sorts of things to Buonaventura, before it is as beautiful as this." With a last glance she turned back into the room, her strong young arms flung out a little beyond the spread of her skirts, their fingers clasping

and unclasping themselves as though in expression of her unspoken delight. "This shall be our playhouse, Mama—just for you and me! *Dios mio!* How good it is to be rich!"

"You know, there was a time when we were not rich at all."

María Pía opened her eyes widely, as though she could not conceive of such a state of affairs.

"Yes, indeed: when you were a baby. We had only just enough money to live upon, and there was no garden then, but only rough grass, with tracks the animals made across it. And the house—you cannot imagine how bare and plain it was, just like a barn."

"*Caramba*, how odd it must have looked."

"And it was so uncomfortable in the wet weather; only one or two fireplaces in the whole place. Your father made many improvements after the money came."

"But I don't understand; there has always been Buonaventura, hasn't there—and the cattle? I thought we got our money from them."

"Buonaventura was very poor as well." María Cayetuña shook her head gravely. "I cannot explain those things, but your grandfather had lost so much money, and there was always trouble with the slaves. I hardly understood it at first, because when we were in Jamaica your father poured money over me like the shower of guineas, and I almost thought it grew like the marigolds in the fields! Then, when we came back here, I found out that he was very worried, so I was worried as well."

"Then where did the money come from?"

"You should have been told before, my dear one." Reaching out her hand, María Cayetuña drew her daughter to sit on the bed. "But there are things it is hard to speak about. . . . My father—your grandfather—left me the money when he died."

"It is *your* money, Mama?"

María Pía spoke incredulously; it was as though, for the first time, her mother was revealed to her as a material factor in the circumstances of her life at the Villa María-Cayetuña. The *muñeca*-Mama, the small, delicate thing to be petted and protected, the focus of her father's love, the tender spirit whose fragility had separated her, for as long as María Pía's memory held good, from active participation in the life of the household, suddenly became potent and actual, the true force behind the prosperity and luxury which, like all children, she had first taken for granted, and whose source she had later sought in her father.

A spate of questions rose to her lips, but she held them back in obedience to her mother's gesture.

"Let me talk, *querida*: you know how soon I get tired, and all these things should have been explained to you long ago, if I had had the strength to do it. Your grandfather, Mateo—no; that it not how it is spoken. Let me think—Maz-ju: it is the English pronunciation, which you must know when you speak of your father's people. Maz-ju Flood was very rich, and all his money came to me, because I was his only child. I can't tell you all the troubles that happened before then—if I had become a nun, the money would have gone to Santa Clara."

"A nun, Mama? Who ever thought of your being a nun?"

"Everybody thought of it, until your father came and took me out of the convent; and they were very angry and tried to stop me from having my money, but the English lawyers said I had to have it, because I was the only child of Mateo—Maz-ju—Flood, so it came to us when you were not quite a year old."

"But this is history!" María Pía was confounded. "Why was I never told before?"

"*Hija*, your father does not like me to talk about my English family. He does not know about Bristol, and about the hill, and the house that looks over two rivers—the house with looking-glasses and birds on the walls——" She stopped to draw breath, and María Pía, stooping, drew her handkerchief soaked in Florida water across her mother's damp brow.

"Go on, Mama!"

"Grey houses," gasped María Cayetuña, with difficulty, "grey—in little gardens—with roses that smell of perfume. I don't remember—I don't remember the rest——"

"Oh, Mama, try—please! There must be some more."

"Ships—ships," she whispered. "They come up the rivers—the two rivers. You can see them from the house."

"Mama, who told you about the house that looks over two rivers."

"My Cousin Gabriel, who came from Barbados."

María Pía's heart gave a tick. It was the first time, since Madame Deschamps had mentioned it to her, that she had heard the name which was associated for her with the mound under the palm trees; the mound the negroes would not pass at night.

"The one whose name is in the books in the parlour cupboard?" she asked carefully.

"When did you find them? Does your father know——?"

"I don't know; I found them one day when Madame Deschamps and I were looking for something to read. They are printed in English, aren't they? Mama, tell me what Cousin Gabriel was like."

"He had very fair hair, and such blue eyes——" A sudden spasm of horror contracted her face: she saw once more, with horrific clarity, that last, staring anguish in the blue eyes that were blind to her for ever. Shocked by the effect of her question, María Pía bent to soothe her mother.

"Never mind, Mama. Tell me more about Bristol."

"What more can I tell you? The name of Flood is very famous there—in Bristol. There are buildings and statues." She struggled vainly with memory. "But the house—the house where your grandfather was born——" she did not know she was inventing—"you will remember that, won't you? You will remember it—and go there one day—perhaps when you are married: and look down at the rivers and the ships—at the ship which brought your grandfather to Cuba——"

"And my grandmother?"

Silence.

María Pía slid an arm under the pillow, and with the utmost tenderness drew her mother's head against her breast. When she spoke, it was like the crooning of a dove.

"Little Mama, tell me: is it because of Grandmama that you don't like the negroes?"

"Must you speak of it?" There was passion and a weak resentment in the tone.

"But, Mama, Grandmama wasn't a slave! Madame Deschamps and Papa both say she wasn't. She was perhaps a great African princess! There must have been something particular about her, or a man like Grandpapa would never have married her."

"Don't you mind about your grandmother being *black*?" whispered María Cayetuña.

"Mind? Why should I mind? Why, I'm almost as fond of some of Grandpapa's people at Buonaventura as though they were my own sisters and brothers: Olimpo, that you wouldn't let me have for my servant, and Chipre, who married Salomon, and I'm godmother to her first baby. Yes, I am, Mama! I didn't ask you about it, because I was afraid you'd refuse, but why should I not be godmother to Chipre's baby? It's the most darling thing in the world, as fat as butter, and Chipre's quite heart-broken that it can't come and be my servant when it grows up. They're so good and faithful, you can trust them with anything, and so kind it's wonderful to have them about you. How could I not love such people, Mama, that I've grown up with and known as long as I can remember? And I know they love me more because I have a little of their blood in me; it makes us understand each other. If they were not slaves," she added passionately, "we should only think how wonderful they are; and if we met them in their own African forests, it is they who would be the great people, and we would owe them all the deference that people give to kings and princes!"

In justice to Madame Deschamps, let it be said that she was not wholly to blame for over-sentimentalizing the position of the negro. So increasingly anxious had she grown, that María Pía should have, on account of her black blood, no sense of inferiority, that the good woman had perhaps gone too far in the opposite direction. It was a few years yet to come before María Pía outgrew her tendency to regard negroes in general as dispossessed victims of a ruling race; and it was certainly only Santiago's example that steadied her attitude to them, and prevented her from alternately tyrannizing over and exalting them.

"I thought," María Cayetuña was whispering, "that you would never forgive me for giving you a negress for your grandmother."

"How sweet, how silly you are! Grandmama must have been wonderful—why, it's hardly a week since I teased Papa into telling me all he remembered about her, and I believe I know more about her than you do."

"All the same"—María Pía felt her mother's light body relax in a sigh—"she was despised in Havana, because she was black."

"Which only shows what fools the Havanese are. I suppose Tía Isabela was one of them?" She shrugged her shoulders contemptuously. "As though any one cares what Tía Isabela says! Do you know, Mama? Grandpapa drove her out in a *volante* with two white mules, and everybody leaned over balconies and climbed up on window-sills to see her driving past, with flame-coloured feathers in her hair, and such jewels—*madre mía*! There can't have been a woman in Havana who wasn't mad with envy of them. It's all very

well," said María Pía wisely, "to talk of despising when you're as jealous as all that! What I'd give to have seen her. When I'm grown up properly and asked to parties in Havana, I shall tell everybody I'm the granddaughter of *la bellísima negra*, and if they're shocked, I'll just laugh in their faces."

"My darling, you must not—indeed you must not boast about it! You do not understand——" But the most extraordinary peace was spreading through her being; a peace in which she hardly dared to believe. It was as though this child of hers had, after all these years, put her hand in her bosom to remove a core of suffering that had been there all her life. It was like the removal of a tumour; she missed its weight and its burning. In the incredible relief, she did not even remember the mortification she had borne as daughter of that lovely, ambiguous creature of whom her granddaughter spoke with so strange an air of exultation, even of pride.

She lay and marvelled, and loved the dark, animated face that hung over her, the courageous face, that would never blench, as she herself had blenched, before that past which had left its darkness upon her own life. Her weak hand rose, to touch that glowing cheek. "My love—my daughter!" She had content, and ineffable peace, while the shadows began to close round her again.

II

Easter morning—the morning of the Resurrection—the ladies of Don Santiago de Lorcha's household put on all their finest raiment, although, by tacit agreement, neither was going to the town. With all the doors and windows flung wide to the sunshine, the air full of the singing of birds and the splash of little fountains, the house seemed full of a delicate, impalpable joy, a golden veil of happiness trembled over the surface of its quiet sorrow, which, for this one day, all put aside. The maidservants had flowers in their hair, the men strutted proudly in the cast-off finery of their master, and the cotton suits of the outdoor workers splashed with a blinding whiteness the rainbows of the parterres. A breathless excitement ran through the household, for today, for the first time in the memories of all who served the Villa, mass was to be celebrated in the house. What an Easter! María Pía, supervising in the kitchen the tremendous preparations for the midday meal, noted the glowing alertness of the faces that surrounded her, the eager heads that nodded obedience to her commands.

"How foolish Papa has been to shut religion away from them! They're all good Catholics, but it can't have been any fun to have to tramp five miles to hear mass and make their confessions," she was thinking. A succulent scent below the kitchen window told her that the sucking-pig was roasting in its bed of charcoal; the fat creole cook, down whose face the sweat was streaming in drops the size of threepenny bits, beamed at her across the immense pot in which the prawns, the octopus, the oysters, the crabs and crayfish bubbled in tear-compelling clouds of red pepper; several little children from Buonaventura sat on the step, scraping the sweet potatoes and examining paw-paws before tossing them into the great pan of boiling water. Every one was in a good temper, every one prepared to contribute their utmost efforts to the

importance of the occasion. Don Emiliano Guiote was actually eating with the family, after the celebration of the mass; God's blessing at last descended upon the Villa María-Cayetuña.

"Will you sit with Mama?" She had met Santiago on the landing, after filling the invalid's room with flowers. He had nodded gravely, gone in and closed the door. As she stood on the terrace, cooling her cheeks after the heat of the kitchen, she could hear the murmur of her parents' voices from above. She and Madame Deschamps had put María Cayetuña into a fresh bedgown of the finest nainsook, so loaded with laces that she smilingly complained she could barely lift her arms. A *velo* of snow-white lace, to wear for the mass, lay folded at the foot of the bed.

"Mama *mia*! You will look like a little bride." To her own surprise and disconcertion, María Pía heard her own voice trembling. It was Madame Deschamps who suggested that, in view of the effort to come, they had better leave her for a little alone. They put her rosary of gold and amber between her fingers, and she looked at them as though further joy was almost insupportable. On María Pía, moving softly in and out with the bowls and vases of flowers, her soft, profound glance rested like a benediction. It was María Pía who guessed that she wanted Santiago.

As though to add the final touch of excitement to the important day, old Adán, whose woolly head was now almost as white as his suit of cotton, came lolloping to the terrace on which María Pía stood.

"Señorita! Coach from Buenaventura coming—Don Pepe coming! Adán seen it from the walls!"

It was true; Don Pepe, who, as we know, had been for many years casual about his religious observances, had not been able to resist the opportunity of joining in the mass which he had heard was to be celebrated at the villa. Some faint, belated anxiety for his soul stirred him to lay aside his pipe, and order his body servant to shave him and put on him the clean linen to which, latterly, he had shown a scandalous indifference. At his great age one did well, perhaps, to make some little provision for the future. They carried him into his long-disused coach, and he bore its joltings, with some disgraceful expletives, over the rough track between Buenaventura and the Villa.

María Pía picked up her petticoats and ran upstairs.

"Papa! Grandpapa is arriving; don't you want to come down and receive him?"

In the hall she laid her hand on his arm.

"Are you going to the *corrida*, Papa?"

His troubled glance rested on her; he understood her meaning.

"What else can I do, *hija*?" he questioned doubtfully "Every one expects me; it is a matter of business."

"I know, dear Papa——" She hesitated, looked at him, and for the second time that day, to her shame, her eyes filled with tears. She jerked her head quickly aside. She felt his hard hand over her own.

"Do you think your mother——?" She knew he had not the courage to finish what he intended to say, and forced herself to smile at him.

"I am only being foolish. Mama is beautiful this morning—no?"

He gave her a look that tore at her heart-strings, and hurried out to receive

his father, and María Pía followed, to give orders to the servants who came to carry Don Pepe into the house.

"What a day—what a day for the bulls!" The tiny, shrunken body gave up but a thread of a voice, but Don Pepe, once established in his chair in the parlour, soon gave evidence of the ample survival of other faculties. He chuckled with pleasure while his granddaughter and Madame Deschamps waited upon him, seeing to the replenishment of the wine in the glasses he emptied with undiminished alacrity. He sniffed critically at the cigars Santiago offered him, rejecting three before accepting the fourth. "I hope you're showing them something good to-day in Havana?"

"They're the best bulls we've bred this season, Grandpapa!" asserted María Pía. Her grandfather winked and sniggered with pleasure; Santiago's face lost its strained look, as the discussion of the topic that still lay nearest to his heart developed.

"I'll just run up and see how Mama is," she whispered to Madame Deschamps, seeing her family thus happily occupied. As Madame Deschamps accompanied her to the door, she added: "Isn't it a treat to get Doña Vespasiana out of the way? The old cow would never have gone if we'd let her know Don Emiliano was coming! You'll tell me, won't you, if he arrives when I'm upstairs?"

"He can't be here, at the earliest, before one o'clock." Madame Deschamps looked at the beautiful brass timepiece whose pendulum described its ceaseless shadowy arc upon the wall. "Why do you not rest a little? The gentlemen are quite satisfied, and Antonio will see they have all they want."

"What about the servants? They ought to be told to be ready when Don Emiliano arrives."

"I will tell them," said Madame Deschamps, pushing her gently towards the stairs. "Go to your mother, and do not trouble about anything."

Was it her anxious imagination, the girl wondered, that seemed to have shrunken and shadowed her mother's face in her short absence. María Cayetuña's head lay back against her pillows, her eyes were closed, her mouth hung open with an expression of pitiful exhaustion. Perhaps the excitement of the coming mass was too much for her; perhaps they ought not to have told her until the priest arrived. She and Madame Deschamps had, indeed, discussed it, finally coming to the conclusion that the anticipation might act as a stimulant. Had they been wrong?

María Pía laid her hand on her mother's bosom, and was first relieved, then alarmed, by the heavy beating of her heart. But María Cayetuña's eyes flashed open; instead of creeping, she came suddenly back to consciousness, to ask:

"Is it time?"

"Not yet, Mama. Look, I am going to sponge your face and hands and tidy the bed."

"I hope," said María Cayetuña faintly, "it will not be too long."

A shaft of sheer terror sped through María Pía's heart. Could it be that her mother was dying—now? How did people look when they were dying? Surely their eyes were not so bright, their skin was not so warm? She reproached herself with cowardice, as, hardly taking her eyes from her mother's face, she moved about the room. No, no! of course not. Besides—her mother

was not going to die! See how much better she had been these last few days.

"The *velo*?" whispered María Cayetuña.

"No, not yet; it will only make you hot. We will put it on as soon as Don Emiliano is here. Look, dear Mama, I am going to read to you out of this little book he left behind the other day."

The calm, religious sentences helped to steady her nerves. She had no idea how long she had been reading, when Madame Deschamps came into the room.

"He is here." She threw a quick glance at the bed. "I will see to your mother, if you will go and get your veil." In deference to Cuban fashion, Madame Deschamps had draped a broad piece of lace over her shining, elegant head.

"No, no, I must arrange the *velo*: I'll do it when I come back."

María Pía sped out on the landing; in the hall below she could hear the voices of her father and the priest, and paused for a moment, with her hands on the banisters, to hear what they were saying. She heard her father dismiss Antonio, and a door closed quietly under the span of the stairs; and then there was a pause, and she heard Santiago say:

"Father, will you hear my confession?"

. . . After the first shock, her thoughts were entirely practical. "That will mean another half-hour, at least, before they come upstairs."

She ran to her room, ran the comb through her hair and rubbed her face with chamois leather; then carefully placed the high tortoiseshell comb, and drew over it the mantilla which she would have worn had she been going to mass at the Merced. She would not allow her thoughts to dwell upon that scene, so poignant and so intimate, which was passing now between her father and the priest; but when she went back to her mother's room, she said to Madame Deschamps:

"I think Grandpapa is alone, so you had better get the servants to carry him upstairs."

Then she shook out the white *velo*, and drew its cobweb of lace over her mother's head, pinning it on either side with a white flower, so that it should not slip. Her fingers were trembling, the lace fell in frosted folds on either side of a profile delicate and sharp as bone; it was as though her mother's eyes were blind, so blankly they looked at her out of their unfathomable darkness.

"Mama, shall we say a rosary, while we are waiting?"

The murmur of their voices was still going on, when the servants bore Don Pepe into the room; nodding to him, María Pía went on with her Ave, the old man, deposited in his chair, crossed himself, and the rumble of his voice joined the women's. Then the rest of the servants came in, the women with *velos* over their heads, and knelt quietly about the room. María Pía looked for Antonio, then remembered it had been arranged that he should serve at the mass. She hoped that all had been thought of, and decided to trust Madame Deschamps, who entered and took her place close by the foot of the bed.

Her father! She did not know how to control the wave of tenderness that surged up, and felt as though it would burst her breast, when Santiago came in. He looked at none of them, the handsome lines of his face broken and empurpled, his eyes set in wet patches that looked as though the flesh was raw. His shoulders were bent a little, but he walked firmly between the kneeling

figures, and María Pfa, drawing back a little, made room for him to pass between her and the bed. With a curious sense of shame—as though she ought not to have been looking—she saw him press a kiss on the back of his wife's hand, as he knelt down; her dark eyes turned on him, but no other sign passed between them.

With the entrance of the priest, the room became a chapel, and María Pfa dropped her face into her hands. Yet, earnestly as she desired to identify herself with this experience that meant so much to all around her, she found her mind straying: first to the death of her mother—from which it fled in terror, then, seeking relief, to the most trivial objects around her. She could see her father's hand out of the corner of her eye, with a fly crawling among the short, dark hairs, and the twitch with which Santiago drove it away. She could hear his heavy, painful breathing, the groaning sigh that broke from him again and again—and suddenly she remembered that, as an excommunicated person, Santiago could hear, but could not share the sacrament. Careless of convention, her hand shot out and clasped her father's; the next moment she almost cried out with the violence of the grip with which his closed on hers. An overwhelming sense of their nearness and dearness to each other made her ache.

Now the Bread was consecrated, and the Wine; now Don Emiliano was bringing it to her mother, stepping carefully over the feet of his kneeling congregation.

She lifted her head; she saw Don Emiliano bend down—remain bending——

She saw her father's face, his anguished, upturned eyes, the tears pouring down like rain——

She heard:

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, may all the power of the Devil be extinguished in thee, by the imposition of our hands——”

She saw Madame Deschamps rise quickly, a look of consternation and horror upon her face; and she knew that those words Don Emiliano had just spoken did not come out of the mass, but out of the Order of Administering the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

I

"Ah, here is your poor Papa!"

María Pía looked round, without pleasure. It was the second time, she noticed, that Santiago, who professed no desire for company, had come in when her aunt and cousin were visiting. His grave mournfulness flung the Marquesa at once into lachrymose mood and even Leonor assumed an air of sanctimonious sorrow, which made María Pía want to scratch her face. Leonor had never loved María Cayetuña! Why should she pretend grief, except to curry favour from Santiago, upon whom, as he formally kissed her hand, she bestowed a long, meaning look, intended, no doubt, to convey her sympathy!

The conversation became very stiff and evasive, very long-winded, in the Spanish fashion. María Pía wondered her father could endure it. And yet, as she looked at him, sitting in his chair beside the window, his eyes on the out-of-doors, while he courteously answered the marquesa's observations, she remembered that he might get some pitiful kind of satisfaction in the company of one whom María Cayetuña had loved, whose pretty quivering face gave evidence of her affection for the dead.

But Lucía, whose social training would carry her through anything, had dropped her pretence when she found herself in the coach, rolling back to Havana, alone with her daughter.

"It is not decent! I can't bear it!" she burst out.

Leonor looked at her mother with the small, cunning eyes set in a pasty little face which, because of its imperturbable self-satisfaction, had always an air of being older than her age. She pursed her lips to say primly:

"It is Tía Isabela's wish; we must always respect her wishes."

Lucía groaned a little, and pressed her hands to her stomach; she had only just been obliged to realize that she was going, after all these years, to have another baby. . . .

II

A hot night, with mosquitoes zinging through the open windows, and María Pía pressed against the curtains, the material of her gown absorbed in their rich darkness. Her hands were behind her back, pressed into the hollow of her waist, and her head flung back, the eyes deep and burning, the lips parted in a delicate, unconscious smile over the starry glitter of her teeth.

"*Qué quieres, hija?*"

"The drums, Papa; don't you hear them?"

Santiago approached the window curiously; yes, through the silence of the night came the deep roll of distant drums, with faint crescendos and every now and then a sound that resembled the hollow note of a horn.

"They're making conjo down at the bohios." She smiled, speaking as though to herself; then, with a sudden recovery, threw her arm about her father's shoulders. "I gave them the drums, Papa! They're real African ones—I bought them from the captain of the ship Tío Miguel sailed in to Spain. He said they were from the Coast—Costa del Oro, and he got them in a place called Fort Charles. He said one was a genuine war-drum—"

"What, with human hide over it!" Santiago laughed, and pinched her ear. "I shouldn't be surprised!" The possibility evidently occasioned her no qualm. "One of the little ones had extraordinary paintings on it—yellow and red: but a dark, blackish red, if you understand. It seemed almost a waste to give them to the slaves, but—" She shrugged her shoulders. "Let's go out, Papa, and listen to them."

They walked out arm in arm, between the starry sky and the no less starry earth: for the *cocujos* made such light that the carnation-embroidered hem of María Pía's gown showed clearly, and made it seem as though she was walking in a bed of flowers. And through what had been the thicket, and was now an orderly grove of cinnamon and oleander, they came to the place from which, more than seventeen years ago, Gabriel Flood had looked down on the bohios, with despair in his heart.

In the deep, blue valley glowed the red cones of the cooking fires, and like smoke from the fires rolled the deep, suffocating noise of the drums, deep, primitives waves that sent their vibration through the stomach and came from the stomach of primitive man. Perhaps not more than a dozen of those who listened to the drum music had ever heard it in its aboriginal setting, yet its message poured down the centuries and out of the black heart of Africa, and was understood in the heart and the belly of every listener. Unconsciously María Pía slipped her hand out of her father's arm and pressed it over her womb.

Santiago felt her tremble, and the sudden, sharp realization of his daughter's link with this people sent a vague revulsion through him.

"Come; the ground is too wet—we must go back to the house," he told her sharply.

She turned without a word, and walked in front of him—but walked with a curious aloofness, her head held high, her elbows close to her sides and her hands lightly clenched; under her silken skirts her thighs moved freely to her long, unconsidered stride. He watched her with perplexity, and a little unease. Yes; it was time, as his sister Isabela kept telling him, that María Pía was married. It would be easier if she were a pliant little thing like that pretty daughter of Lucía de Montalba's; a match might easily have been made for her with her cousin, Juan-María de Montalba y de Coria, if María Pía would not so persistently make mock of her young Montalba relations.

When they re-entered the candle-lit hall, she seemed, with a quick, decisive gesture that pushed and lifted the hair from her temples, to throw off the spell of the drum-threaded night.

"Ay! It was good to get a little fresh air! I suppose I'll have to suffocate for the next three days in Havana."

"Some people might envy you your suffocation," rejoined Santiago.

"Well, come, you've got nothing to envy! I suppose while I'm dancing my slippers into holes you'll be winning the price of a new plantation from those of your friends who're so imprudent as to take you on at cards!" She

flung herself on a chaise-longue and picked up her fan. "Papa, have you thought any more about the house in Havana?"

"*Madre de dios*, you have two houses; what do you want with another?"

"To start with, we haven't two houses; for the repairs at Buenaventura won't be finished for a long while yet, and you know we can't make all the alterations that you and I have planned until Grandpapa dies. But it's not very agreeable for me, always having to stay either with Tía Isabela or Tía Lucía when I spend the night in Havana; and now Tía Lucía's sick, I always have that boring Leonor on my hands. Besides, after the baby's born, Tía Lucía will be joining Tío Miguel in Madrid, and then there'll be nothing for it but the Palacio Aroche. *Muchas gracias!*" said María Pía ironically. "I'm not going to become a lodger on Tía Isabela, if I know it!"

"Well, what do you propose to do about it?" asked Santiago easily.

She rose suddenly, sat down at the table at which he was sitting, and settled her elbows upon it.

"I will tell you; and you must promise not to be angry. Papa, it is absurd that you, who are the richest and perhaps the wisest man in this neighbourhood, should spend your whole life out in the country, seeing no one but *monteros*, and taking no share in the government of our country."

Santiago threw up a hand in an impatient gesture.

"What is the use of going over all this again? First, I am a creole, and under the Consejo no creoles can hold office. Second, I am an excommunicate, and as such ineligible for local government. You know both of these things; why bring this old subject up again?"

"Even if you can't take your seat in the *audiencias*, there are plenty of creole *alcaldes*; and I've heard you say many a time that the *alcaldes mayores* have more power than the Consejo itself—which operates through people who don't really know the people they are governing," she insisted.

"I have no time to be an *alcalde mayor*."

"*Qué disparate!*" The brows drew down, the firm lips curled. "There's no need to spend half the time you do on Buenaventura; it's not like it used to be in the old days, when you had to keep your eye on everything. I flatter myself that you and I between us"—in spite of his annoyance, Santiago could not restrain a smile—"have put the fear of God sufficiently into these people to be sure of things not going wrong if you are away now and again for a few days! Listen: they are appointing Sebastián Matanzas at Bayamo; the town is very angry—there is talk of revolution. Every one is saying, what is the use of these appointments of men who know nothing whatever about local politics? Besides, Matanzas comes of a poor family; he will care nothing about the administration of the law, and will use his appointment to fill his pockets."

Santiago's lips tightened. That was nothing new, of course; it was the sort of thing that was happening all over Cuba.

"What business are these things of yours, *hija*?"

"You are always talking about the need for reform in our laws," she went on, ignoring him. "And, though you may not be able to do anything about them yourself, you can always make people listen, if you get them about you. Naturally they won't—the important ones—come all the way out here to listen to you: but if we had a house in Havana——"

"I see; you want me to run a hotbed of politics in Havana." He smiled dimly.

"Why not? Who could do it more safely than yourself, considering all the strings you can pull, if you choose?"

"What, with the Church pulling the other way?"

"Now, Papa." She dropped her slightly dogmatic manner and stretched out her long, brown hand to lay it on her father's. "Listen, Papa *mio*. You have had all the amusement you wanted out of defying the Church, and, now that Mama is gone, there is no point in keeping it up any longer."

"You think I should turn now——!"

"Pah! Who talks of turning? You make your confession, you sometimes hear a mass. You've gone more than half-way, Papa, and why not finish the journey? You've only got to see the Bishop—a matter uncle Diego could very well arrange for you——"

"*Bastante*. I am not on those terms with your uncle Diego."

"*Bueno*. *Pues*—fix it for yourself. But for God's sake, Papa, will you not consider what a man like yourself could do for Cuba, if you would but exert yourself to get a following about you? Think of the creole laws; it is absurd that people like ourselves, who hold so much of the island property, should get none of the concessions, and that we should just let the chapetones make money out of us——"

"These are matters not to be understood by women," said Santiago.

She stamped her foot.

"If a woman has enough brains to be interested in them, why shouldn't she be allowed to give her opinion?"

"*Hija*." He spoke with deep affection. "I don't want a politician for a daughter."

"*Qué disparate!*" she cried gaily. "If you see me at Tía Isabela's to-morrow night, I promise you you shall see something more than a politician. But listen, Papa: if Buonaventura's coming to me, I've got a right to take an interest in politics."

"You have not yet found the master for Buonaventura," he reminded her. She tapped an impatient foot.

"You wouldn't have me take anything that comes along?" she demanded scornfully. Santiago burst into a great profane roar of laughter.

"Anything—*madre de dios*! You have every planter in Havana to choose from."

"The real master of Buonaventura," she told him obdurately, "will be my son. It will take something more than planter's blood to give a master to Buonaventura."

He looked at her curiously; there was truth in what she said.

"There is the ranch as well, you remember."

"That," she informed him, "will be the affair of my second son."

Enraptured, he caught her round the waist. It was sheer refreshment to talk to María Pía, to meet her cheerful assurance about the future. He, in the full energy of his prime, was in no hurry to be provided with a son-in-law, and it was only when fretted by Isabela, or maliciously asked by Asunción Gamborena whether he intended his daughter to be a Beata, that he troubled himself about her fantastic disinclination towards marriage.

"I won't let Buonaventura down, Papa! But first I mean to have my own sort of good time, and work all the frivolity out of my system which might interfere with my future charge." She touched his face gravely. "De Lorchas have always lived on their plantation, haven't they, Papa? and when I am married I shall do the same. But I must see something of the world first."

To please Madame Deschamps she did her best to cultivate the accomplishments of young ladies: plying an embroidery needle with angry skill, half vexed because she did not fail, even in this most distasteful of occupations; reading aloud in French, with the nasal Cuban accent her governess never managed to cure, stalking to mass on feast days with glares for the gallants who best the path of the de Lorchas heiress. Not that she was averse from masculine admiration; but these sleek, ogling Cubans for some reason revolted her; their object was too plain, their approach too like that of the stalking animal. She wanted—she did not know what she wanted; but something as unlike these Havanese youths as heaven was from hell.

III

They were strolling past the cook-house, where a ring of young slaves were beating the red husks off the rice with wooden pestles. María Pía saw one of the boys put his hand into the bowl and throw something away. "What's that?" She shot her own hand into the bowl, pulled out a handful of rice and lifted it to her nose. "Fetch Tercio!"

The big Eboe overseer came grinning.

"This rice is musty!"

"All that lot musty, *ama*."

"Who sold it to us?"

"Euro Escudero, *ama*; Buonaventu'a get all its grain from him."

"Go to the house and say you are to have enough rice for two days from the household."

"*Ma chère*," said Madame Deschamps, as the overseer loped away, "do you think you should give orders like that without permission from your father?"

María Pía's lips curled in mischief.

"You heard Tercio call me *ama*—? Well, we'll show them what *ama* means. I shall tell Papa we must stop getting grain from Escudero. We may have a new hospital, but I don't want it filled up with niggers with bellyache."

They were on their way to the little woods—"las selvitas"—which were really the great woods, thrusting their fingers down and across the plain; María Pía and Madame Deschamps on horseback, behind them, in a light cart drawn by one of Santiago's mules, María Pía's Olimpo, two of the house negroes from the Villa, and a groom. The two ladies carried, as a matter of course, the light firearms on which Santiago insisted for expeditions at a distance from the house—although, with the extermination of the *cimarrón* bands, it was more than unlikely they would ever have need of self-protection. The negroes, who carried broad, flat baskets of reed on their knees, sang softly; the women's contraltos, the men's deeper notes followed the riders with an indescribably sweet and happy echo. Nothing, Madame Deschamps

was thinking, could have been more typical of the altered conditions on Buonaventura.

The little woods were, according to Madame Deschamps, as good as an apothecary's shop; she had taught María Pía to recognize the cathartics, the caustics, the vermifuges, diuretics and tonics by their smell, and to make infusions that would cure anything from jigger sickness to the mild, uncontagious form of leprosy from which the slaves occasionally suffered. They collected negro remedies, to which she added her store of French ones, and learned the medicinal properties of palms, calabash, manchineel, the peppers, fustic.

In teaching her pupil all these things, Madame Deschamps was conscious of widening the gulf between María Pía and the average girl of her age, interested in nothing but dancing and flirtation; but salved her conscience with the reflection that, since the girl would never fit into the common category, it was better to give her something of her own. She was so strong, so vigorous and restless that it seemed impossible to exhaust her vitality, and Madame Deschamps knew better than allow her to squander it on matters which would leave too much scope for various undesirable influences—of which not the least was the Condesa de Coria.

And it was really Madame Deschamps who was behind the many changes on Buonaventura—changes to which its owners were indifferent, but to which Santiago said, shrugging his own shoulders, that María Pía might do as she liked, provided she did not spoil his workers. It was Madame Deschamps who put it into the girl's mind that even slaves need not live in so disgusting a condition of dirt and squalor as people seemed to take for granted: and who pointed out that disorder was a cog thrust into the wheel of progress, not a necessary accompaniment of industry.

The first step had been staffing the Villa with negroes from the old house at Buonaventura, whom María Pía ruled with a rod of iron, while treating them so well that they were soon envied by all their fellows. It was not so very long before the new influence spread to the bohios, where it caused a great sensation, and much gossip, which soon went beyond the plantation. For it was an unknown thing, in Cuba, for plantation owners' wives and daughters to interest themselves in the slaves; Santiago was very much criticized for allowing it—which troubled him as little as might be imagined—and María Pía was regarded with disapproval by traditionalists, who were shocked by this departure from local convention. Let them be shocked! Santiago saw no cause for anything but pride in a daughter who could dance down a score of partners in any Havanese ballroom, and rode like a *rejoneador*.

For an hour the ladies strolled and plucked in the sun-dappled glades of the little woods, stripping the leaves with their gloved hands into the baskets, pausing now and again to sit down and eat the sugared limes they had brought with them for their refreshment; when Olimpo dabbed their necks and shoulders with the solution of vinegar and cloves to take away the sting of bites, and bathed away the sweat with Florida water.

"Yes," murmured María Pía, lying on her back on a mossy bank and squinting up at the intricate pattern of leaves overhead. "It is certainly getting time I visited Havana again. If I let myself grow too rustic out here, I shall forget how to deal with Tía Isabela!"

"Your aunt Lucía will certainly be glad to have you for a while," said Madame Deschamps, who deplored, though she knew she could not prevent, the visits to the Aroche palace. "I fear her pregnancy has come as a great shock to the poor marquesa!"

"It would to most people, after thirteen years!" was the blunt rejoinder. "And I'm sure, if I were she, I'd be furious with disappointment at being left behind when Tío Miguel went to Spain. Of course, I'd never have agreed to it. But Tía Lucía is such a foolish, yielding little thing——!"

"It would hardly be prudent to undertake a long ocean voyage in her condition, would it?"

"Ah, bah! If you *want* to do a thing very much, it very rarely does you harm," declared María Pía positively. "If you ask me, she'd have gone if Tía Isabela hadn't stuffed Tío Miguel up with all that about a miscarriage, until he flatly refused to take her." She rolled over on her elbows, pensively chewing a blade of grass. "I wonder what Tía Isabela's game was? I'll wager it wasn't consideration for Tía Lucía, whom she frightened out of her wits with her descriptions of Spanish doctors—if *that* didn't bring on a miscarriage, I swear nothing else will!

"You know," she went on conversationally, "when I was a child I used to hate Tía Isabela; I'd have killed her, if I could, while Mama was alive. I suppose I still hate her in a way, but one can't hate a great, fat, overdressed thing like that very seriously; she's too ridiculous!"

"I would not, if I were you, *ma chère*," said Madame Deschamps carefully, "take the condesa too lightly."

"Oh, I know she's as dangerous as a serpent, and only lives to make trouble and twist people's lives about: I wonder what she's up to with Leonor, by the way? The pair of them are as thick as thieves, and the other day, when Tía Lucía came in to tell us she wasn't going to Madrid, I saw them look at each other quickly, as if it was the very best news in the world, and before poor Tía Lucía had stopped crying they were kissing and fondling each other like a pair of lovers," concluded María Pía disgustedly.

"If Leonor is fond of her aunt, it is natural she should be pleased at the postponement of her visit to Madrid."

"Fond of her aunt!" María Pía's lip curled. "Up to a month ago she did nothing but talk about the *grandes* she would meet at the court of Spain, and how many proposals she would get. Then—it all stopped suddenly." She sat up, and her eyes narrowed, as though they were trying to see something half concealed. "Yes, now I remember; it all stopped *suddenly*, and Leonor started looking so smug I couldn't bear her about me. There's some plot—that's what it is—between her and Tía Isabela. What I'd give to find out what it's all about!"

Madame Deschamps' memory had also served her; it had produced, out of the near past, another incident which, at the time, had disquieted her. It was so little a thing—and yet so grim; and she could think of no explanation for it.

It was on the day that the marqués and his sons had left Cuba, and Lucía and Leonor, Mari Pía and herself were sitting in the condesa's balcony overlooking the plaza; Lucía was inclined to be tearful, bemoaned her grass

widowhood and the waste of all the fashionable new gowns that had been designed to dazzle Madrid.

"Which you couldn't have worn, at any rate," Isabela pointed out, "until your pregnancy was over. And another thing—you surely don't think Cuban fashions would impress Castile? I shouldn't be surprised if you had found yourself a perfect laughing-stock at the court, turning up in our colonial styles! You can at least console yourself with the thought that you can be, for the next month or two, at any rate, the fashionable sensation of Havana."

"A lot of consolation that is!" sniffed the marquesa, dabbing her long lashes with her handkerchief.

It was Leonor who spoke—Leonor, who, nestled into the sunniest corner of the balcony, within reach of her aunt's caressing hand, had the air of a sleek little bloated spider, bursting with self-sufficiency and secret knowledge.

"I dare say," she lisped, "we should be very much disappointed in Madrid. I dare say Havana can be just as lively and fashionable if we trouble to make it so. It is, after all, for us, leaders of society"—she drew up her tightly corseted body and puffed out her chest with so ludicrous an imitation of her Aunt Isabela that María Pía gave a yap of mockery—"to set the public taste!"

And then came the fleeting incident which, by its sheer grimness, stamped itself into Madame Deschamps' memory. The marquesa dropped her handkerchief, and looked at her daughter with eyes which, for a second, were filled with horror and loathing.

IV

"Do you like Don Ildefonso?"

It had taken some manœuvring to draw María Pía into the privacy of her aunt's tiring-room, where the moths swirled in clouds around the smoking candle flames

María Pía gave a foolish little laugh; her movements were almost as erratic as the moths', and she lurched across to the divan and let herself drop on it ungracefully.

"Like him? With all those smallpox marks over his face? What an idea! Of course I did not like him. I was just feeling—funny. It is not my fault," she pouted, "if I am chased into corners by old men who want to poke and finger—ach! It is like a mouse running up one's arm!" And as if, Madame Deschamps reflected, the mouse sensation was not wholly disagreeable.

"You had better take a glass of water."

"Oh, no. I don't want to drink. Besides, Tía Isabela gave me a drink just before I went into the *sala*. Is there some more of it? There's the glass—just over there."

She pointed unsteadily; Madame Deschamps lifted a glass which stood on one of the little tables and held it delicately to her nose.

"Is this what you drank?"

"Oh—I suppose so. Tía Isabela said it would make me more—more animated!"

The Frenchwoman set it down grimly. She knew the faint scent of an aphrodisiac favoured by Havanese ladies who wished to make themselves

irresistible to their lovers. So there were no lengths to which the condesa was not prepared to go—even to the extent of debauching her niece! Her desire was to lower the girl in her own and other people's estimation, and for her own evil ends she was deliberately playing on the susceptibility of mixed blood to decadent influences.

"*Viens-toi, ma chérie. Comme tu es belle, comme tu es élégante! Tu sais, tu es beaucoup plus élégante que ma cochonne de tante!*" She had dragged herself from the couch, and was advancing with a foolish, amorous expression and gesture on Madame Deschamps.

The Frenchwoman lifted her hand and struck the girl once, smartly and lightly, across the cheek. With her hand to her face, María Pía, stupefied, stammered:

"*Qué es—?*"

"That is to bring you to your senses. Find your cape; we are going home."

"To B-Buonaventura? But it's so late! And the coach isn't ordered."

"There are plenty of coaches outside; one of them will surely take us a few yards, to your Aunt Lucía's."

María Pía began to laugh. She went to the table and picked up the glass, smelling it, as Madame Deschamps had done.

"What was it—poison?"

"It comes to the same thing," said Madame Deschamps dryly. "You will please not accept drinks again, unless I am with you."

She swayed, fingering the glass, with a dim, cock-eyed look on her *dueña*.

"Of course Tía Isabela would like to poison me—as she would have liked to poison Mama. She hates Papa to think about any one but herself—she thought when Mama died that she would be able to make him do whatever she wanted, and then she found there was—me."

María Pía winked disgracefully, set down the glass, took up the silver pitcher that stood beside it and poured herself a full glass of water, which she drained at a draught. It seemed to sober her, but the next moment she caught at the base of her throat.

"I think I'm going to vomit!"

"Quite the most desirable thing that you could do," said Madame Deschamps, without sympathy. "You had better go in there."

A sober, but drained and somewhat bedraggled María Pía emerged presently from the condesa's closet, calling to Isabela's mulatto girl to come and arrange her hair. The eyes of the two met in the glass, with no embarrassment because the same blood happened to flow in the bodies of mistress and maid.

"We can't leave yet! Papa said he would be coming later, when he had finished his gambling at the Ferrobancos."

"I think you will go now, *ma chère*," said Madame Deschamps quietly; she had assumed her shawl and gloves. "Before you have further opportunity of disgracing yourself!"

"There's no disgrace in being sick," pouted María Pía.

Madame Deschamps was too well accustomed to the crudities of even well-bred Havanese society to dispute this; she was, however, about to insist when the condesa entered.

"But what are you doing?" she cried. "Don Ildefonso is looking for you everywhere! And there is another gentleman who is demanding to be pre-

sented to you—Don Xavier de Carbonnel!” The hero, thought Madame Deschamps, who kept her eye on Havanese gossip, of a most unedifying exploit in one of the entertainment houses. Was a historic name supposed to qualify its bearer for the society of an innocent girl of strict upbringing?

The condesa’s eyes were glittering; it was evident she did not mean to be disobeyed. But she reckoned without de Lorcha blood in the girl who stood before her, faltering between two authorities.

“Come—I thought you had grown out of these stupid fits of obstinacy of yours!” she said sharply, and went so far as to lay her hand on María Pía’s wrist. It was instantly jerked out of her grasp, and María Pía curtsied as she answered ironically:

“I am not accustomed to being given my orders like that, Tía Isabela!” She turned to Madame Deschamps to add: “We were going, were we not, madame?”

There were moments, reflected Madame Deschamps, when one might be thankful for her pupil’s obstinate refusal to accept coercion! At the same time María Pía was openly sullen on their drive to the marquesa’s, and it was plain that she regretted her surrender to the temptation of defying her aunt.

The night watchman swung back the grille, and escorted the ladies with a torch to the first-floor apartments. As they stood on the marble gallery which ran round the patio, a clock struck two.

“And the night is not half over!” said María Pía vexedly. “What do you expect me to do now? We can hardly go to bed at this hour in Havana? If we had waited for Papa he would perhaps have taken us to the theatre.”

“You know your father never leaves the Ferrobancos’ early,” said Madame Deschamps. “He would probably have arrived much too late for the theatre, and, *ma chère*, it is surely more agreeable here than in those hot, crowded rooms?”

“But what are we to *do*?” persisted María Pía. “I suppose Tía Lucía and Leonor will both have gone to bed. . . . I’ll tell you what,” her face lightened, “let us go and see if Doña Silvia is in her sitting-room; she will perhaps tell our fortunes by the cards!”

Doña Silvia, a gay little chapetone lady, fulfilled in the household of the marquesa de Montalba the same function that had been fulfilled at the Villa by Doña Vespasiana, up to her dismissal, upon which María Pía had insisted after her mother’s death. She was not in her sitting-room, which was in darkness, so they went to the *sala*, which, to their surprise when they opened the door, was blazing with candles; and Doña Silvia and Leonor, who looked oddly uncomfortable at the entrance of her cousin and Madame Deschamps, were, even more surprisingly, fully dressed: Leonor with flowers in her hair and a general air of simpering satisfaction that, as usual, roused María Pía’s instant irritation.

“*Por dios*, what on earth are you doing—all dressed up as though you were going to a party?”

“I—I suppose there’s no objection to my getting used to a new gown before I wear it in public?” stuttered Leonor.

“Or getting used, I suppose, to that orchid you’ve stuck in your hair?” jeered María Pía. “If I had as fat a face as yours, Leonor, I wouldn’t put things at the side of my head. It makes you look like—like a sucking-pig!”

she ended with satisfaction in having found an apt simile. Leonor was rather like that, with her buttery-fat cheeks and her very small, not very dark eyes! "Well, we thought we should find you all in bed," she went on, quite good-temperedly, having scored off her cousin. "But now we can have a game of cards! You missed something this evening, I can tell you," she said triumphantly, "it was one of Tía Isabela's best parties! I told you you were a little idiot to have a headache."

"You don't seem to have enjoyed it much, considering how early you are back!"

"That shows how much you know," retorted María Pía provokingly. "There's always a moment when it's prudent to leave a party: and when someone has got into such a state of excitement about you that he's ready to jump over the moon, or swim to Jamaica, or do anything that's extravagant to show the extent of his devotion—that's the time to come away!"

"Who was it? Pedro Ortega?" demanded Leonor, who, for all her detestation of María Pía, could not resist a piece of gossip.

"You don't suppose I'd look at any of that Ortega crowd?" said María Pía, enjoying her improvisation. She had, in fact, almost forgotten that she had had a hectic, yet not positively enjoyable, evening, with too many elderly men about her, besides the young ones who looked at women in a fashion that something about her resented. "You were a fool not to come, Leonor——"

"No, no, she was not a fool." Doña Silvia came to the support of her charge. "We are going to a concert to-morrow evening, are we not? And some people do not think it is a good thing for a young girl to be seen in public too often."

"Oh-ho!" scornfully observed María Pía. "'Young girl,' did you say? She's two years older than I am, at any rate, and, let me tell you, people are beginning to talk a great deal about her not being married. It's all very well to keep up one's value, but unless one meets the right people——"

"My marriage is arranged, thank you!"

Doña Silvia cast a quick, warning glance at Leonor.

"So I've heard; but if you make such a secret of it, who's going to believe you?" María Pía shuffled and dealt expertly. "Madame, are you coming? The cards are ready."

Madame Deschamps turned slowly from a cabinet on the farther side of the room, and, in doing so, slid something into her pocket. She did not play her usual good game that night; perhaps she was disturbed by the small weight, against her calf, of an object which she had noticed, and recognized, with incredulous horror, immediately upon her entrance into the room; a snuff-box of ivory and gold which had been offered to her time and time again.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

THE only one of the people she liked among those whom she met regularly at the house of her aunt Isabela was Julio Gamborena, who had grown into a handsome, rather silent young man, whose name was linked persistently with one of the young Ferroblanco countesses. From Julio she accepted with pleasure flowers for her *coiffure*, on one occasion a painted fan to use at the *corrida*—she having left her own behind; she had begun to wish that Julio would go to greater lengths—would write poems to accompany the bouquets, and perhaps ride out to the Villa on a moonlight night to talk to her through the *rejas*—when she became aware of a sniggering amusement in the eyes of one or two of the people who looked on at this idyll.

María Pía, who was no fool, and knew as much of the town gossip as any girl who paid constant visits to Havana, could guess the reason of this. She had heard all about her aunt's flirtation with Julio Gamborena, it was ancient history, and obviously Tía Isabela had got over it, for she really encouraged in every way her niece's evident *penchant*. What a pity it was that Julio Gamborena and his family had nothing to do with sugar planting! His old, incredibly old father—who seemed quite as old as grandpapa—held some important office at the University, and all Julio's interest turned towards the romance of sea-venture; he had told María Pía all about his collection of old and rare maps, and of his longing to contribute to the knowledge of the old cartographers. Seated in one of the deep bays of the Aroche *sala*, so withdrawn from the rest of the company—that made eyes and grimaced—that they might have been lovers, he described to her the voyages of the Carthaginians, the Atlantis of Plato, the bold expedition of Mador Prince of Wales, son of Owen Guinredd, which he had discovered in the pages of Hækluyt: the voyages of Bacchus and the land Ophir of Solomon. Julio was one of those who subscribed to the belief that neither Columbus nor Americus Vespucius had been the discoverers of America, but the almost unknown Martin Behem, created Behenira by John II of Portugal: a character which engaged the utmost of Julio's interest and sympathies.

All of this fascinated the girl and broadened her mind, Julio's company and conversation was like a refreshing spring amid the turgidity of her aunt's society. She confided in Julio her longing to travel, and, above all, to visit England, the country of her maternal ancestry: a country which, declared Julio, boasted a more vivid and progressive intellectual life than any other of the northern hemisphere. That did not so much attract María Pía; she was no more of an intellectual than the average woman of her nationality and day. People, rather than ideas, were what attracted her; action, rather than vision, appealed to her energetic nature.

Madame Deschamps, while recognizing its dangers, could not bring herself to forbid this pleasant companionship: her husband had been an amateur of science, a member of the French National Institute, a friend of Fourcroy,

Cavallo and Baume, and during his lifetime she had been used, in their little apartment, to hearing conversation of a kind she had almost forgotten since her arrival in the West Indies. She liked Julio Gamborena, and pitied him; there hung about him, now in his late twenties, that slight air of melancholy and futility that distinguished many of the young Cubans whose life of self-indulgence, conditioned by the gratification of their material requirements, left unsatisfied some deeper part of their natures. She felt it was probably this very melancholy that attracted María Pía as it is said always to attract strong characters.

But she knew it was an association which must not be allowed to go too far, or to gain too strong a hold on María Pía's imagination, and while she debated within herself the most kindly and delicate fashion in which she could warn the girl against her new friendship, Leonor de Montalba—herself fanciful where Julio Gamborena was concerned—took it on herself to prick the bubble of a growing romance.

"I don't think you ought to encourage Julio Gamborena the way you do," she observed, on an evening when the girls were prinking themselves for a visit to the theatre.

"Oh, indeed?" María Pía lifted a curl, stabbed in a jewelled pin, and added a trace of saffron powder to the faintly rouged oval of her cheek. Her complexion, indeed, her looks in general, had much improved, and for the evenings Madame Deschamps had agreed that a modest degree of maquillage was no longer out of place. "I suppose you want him, is that it? Well, if you like, you'll have the opportunity to-night; he's coming to our box after the first piece."

"I suppose you know everybody is talking about you?" Leonor spoke venomously; her little, pursed lips expressed malice as well as disapproval.

María Pía picked up her fan—the same which Julio had given her; it was not really quite grand enough for evening wear, but its gay vermilion sticks made becoming contrast to her amber brocade and black lace.

"My poor cousin! Do people ever stop talking in Havana? The less there is to talk about, the more they must invent."

"In this case there is something to talk about. It's quite time somebody told you that Julio Gamborena is your brother."

... She was silent. A little stunned. Then ... it was a lie! But even as refutation sprang to her lips, she knew that even Leonor was not likely to invent so preposterous a suggestion. She saw the round, self-satisfied face of Leonor nodding at her in the glass.

"I must say you aren't very observant! He's the image of Tío Santiago."

She recovered herself quickly, and the laugh she gave was worthy of Isabela.

"Really, you can't imagine you are surprising me? I think I am more likely to know the affairs of my own family than you are! It's a pity you are so old-fashioned, Leonor, and can't see any conversation going on between a man and a woman without leaping to the conclusion there's a love affair behind it! And I'll tell you something else," she added viciously, as she snatched up her fallen fan and rose from the stool. "You'd better hurry up with that mysterious marriage of yours, for half the town doesn't believe in it at all, and says you're sure to be a Beata!"

She had the satisfaction of a flash of fury from Leonor's eyes, as she swept, still laughing, from the room. But there was a moment outside, on the gallery, when, with no one to see, she leaned on the balustrade, panting a little, with her hand clasped under her breast to steady the beating of her heart. It was the first time in her life that she had thought of her father in connection with any woman save María Cayetuña, the shock was acute, though it was her sentiment rather than her sense of propriety that suffered.

She did not want to think too much of this thing for the present; she would go and sit for a little with Tía Lucía, who was so nervous these days, so full of fluttering affection and a puzzling kind of air of apology that it was quite a penance to be with her.

"You won't blame me for anything, will you?" she kept repeating, while María Pía racked her brains to find out what was distressing her aunt: and came to the conclusion that it was all to do with the baby. When women had babies at that age, it sometimes sent them a little crazy. "I'm stupid, you know—everybody knows better than I do—but I don't know, I don't know!" She wrung her little bejewelled hands.

Between Tía Lucía and Leonor it was really not much fun visiting Havana these days! Still one could not spend one's whole life on the plantation, thinking about—thinking about——

When Julio Gamborena came to the box that night, he was surprised when the hand which he raised to his lips resisted the caress with a firm, strong pressure that took his eyes to those of its owner. María Pía's eyes, warm, deep, with a new, sad knowledge in them, met his own, and he knew that she knew what he had always known. No word was spoken, but the hearts of brother and sister drew close in the shadows of the box, and each knew that, although they might never meet again, the blood they shared bound them together in a bond of love that could never be affected by any relationship to which either might, in the future, be committed.

II

Madame Deschamps was troubled. She felt deeply the necessity of warning Santiago against his daughter's visits to the Aroche palace, and at the same time guessed its futility. Nothing was less likely than that a man of his temperament should be brought to believe in the ill faith of his sister. But she had made up her mind to ask point-blank what plans he and the condesa were making for María Pía's future. It was her right, as the girl's guardian, to know. And she knew that Santiago spent much time in the company of his sister Isabela, although his visits seldom coincided with those of his daughter.

The condesa was also a frequent visitor at the Villa, often bringing Leonor—her excuse being that, owing to her mother's sickness, the girl was not getting about as much as she should. On one occasion she arrived with quite a bevy of ladies—as many as the de Coria coach would hold, and Santiago played the host with so much gallantry that his daughter was thunderstruck. She had never seen her father pay attention to women before, and the old

jealousy pricked her heart, although she was beginning to learn how to conceal her feelings.

The ladies paraded among the little parterres, their petticoats filled the rotundas with a fullness of overblown roses, and, to María Pía's astonishment, Leonor assumed quite the airs of the cicerone.

"This is where the goldfish breed; over there there is going to be a little summer parlour." María Pía came up just as her cousin was pointing out the small, circular platform which she and Madame Deschamps had designed for the *mirador* that was to be the latest addition to the garden. It was to be built in three stories; the lowest consisting of colonnades, with a circular seat in the middle; above that the parlour, where the ladies could sit and read or sew in summer weather, and above it the *palomar*, with the white doves slipping in and out of their little silvery archways. "White doves," Leonor was saying. "I think they all ought to have little coral-coloured bands round their necks, don't you? You know, to match their pink feet."

"What taste!" the ladies were chorussing, when María Pía cut in ironically.

"Upon my word, Leonor, it is kind of you to take so much interest in my belongings!" Leonor blushed a little, and giggled rather foolishly. "Is there anything else you would all like to see? Any suggestions you, Leonor, would like to make? I had no idea you were so inventive!"

The abashed company began to scatter, and María Pía, following them, was careful to allow Leonor no more opportunity for putting on airs of possession. It was Santiago who, presently, conducted them to the stables and had his own horses and María Pía's brought out for their delighted inspection: for, like all the younger ladies of Cuba, they were ardent horsewomen, and Santiago's was reputed the finest stud in the island.

Among the lovely animals that paraded in the hands of the grooms was the gentle, silver-grey mare that had been María Cayetúña's; she saw her father's eyes narrow, his face stiffen, as old Adán led it out into the sun. It gave a soft whinny as it reached its pale, tender muzzle out towards the spreading, pale-coloured skirts that reminded it of its mistress. Leonor, whose lack of courage in the saddle brought her cousin's contempt upon her, cried out in ecstasies.

"Oh, what a divine animal! What grace, what elegance!"

"It is yours," said Santiago instantly.

Forgetting that the words were no more than a polite formula, with which it was customary to acknowledge compliments on any of one's possessions, María Pía felt the blood pouring up her neck. She turned abruptly on her heel and went back to the house, making no other appearance until the visitors had gone away.

"Papa! You don't mean to give Mama's mare to Leonor?"

He turned on her as though she had insulted him.

"What are you saying? Do you think I am out of my mind?"

He went into the garden, and was observed by his daughter walking up and down, with his hands linked behind his back, and that sad, absent-minded expression returned to his face which had lifted, like a cloud, only for a little while. For the first time in her life, María Pía was glad to see her father sad.

"I suppose it's natural that Papa should enjoy the company of ladies,"

she observed to Madame Deschamps, when they sat alone at supper—Santiago having sent the message that he was riding over to the Rodríguez plantation, and would not be back until late at night.

"Perfectly natural, *ma petite*," Madame Deschamps spoke with an assumed calm. In her heart she blamed Santiago bitterly for neglect of his daughter, for, although it was now more than eighteen months since María Cayetuña's death, and he had in most respects resumed his normal way of living, she saw that the old intimacy between him and María Pía had not revived; there was a constraint, of which the girl was well aware, although pride kept her from open acknowledgment, even to Madame Deschamps.

She dared not voice, even to herself, that which, on María Pía's behalf, she most deeply feared; feared, and, at the same time, could not bring her intelligence to accept it.

"Here is a man," she argued with herself, applying all of her native rationalism to a situation in which she felt so much of the purely irrational, "who, out of devotion to a single woman, has practised for a number of years an abstinence which his previous life shows to have been abnormal. He was faithful—*mon Dieu*, how many men would have been as faithful, for all their love?—so long as his fidelity could serve the one to whom it was dedicated. But he is not a sentimentalist; and now that the cause of his fidelity is removed, is it unnatural that those passions which he so long denied should assert themselves?"

How could one put such an argument as that to a girl?—whose devotion to her mother's memory, no less than her jealous affection for her father, would rise in arms against any such explanation of a situation which was becoming more and more transparent every day.

Madame Deschamps felt that it was unnecessarily transparent. If Santiago felt himself incapable of continuing in continence—a state of affairs for which the Frenchwoman was the last in the world to blame him—there was ample provision in Havana for a widower anxious to preserve the dignity of his wife's memory, and at the same time unwilling or unable to sacrifice his private cravings.

Meanwhile, she had to watch the girl's eyes fixed upon her father with an almost pitiful watchfulness. It was really the matter of Julio Gamborena which had brought home vividly to María Pía that her father was a man like other men: a man who, before he met her mother, had lived a full, man's life and begotten children even as her grandfather had begotten them round and about Buonaventura. But all those dark-coloured, illegitimate relations had never seemed to matter—she had taken them in her stride, as her father and her aunt had done before her; it was Julio Gamborena who mattered, who brought this business of man and woman, as it affected her father, so close to her consciousness that it seemed sometimes to press upon and stifle her brain. If there was Julio Gamborena, there might be others; when once her mind was set in this direction, it may well be imagined that in a place like Havana it was not long before she rooted out the rest. A few discreet questions—posed with an air of taking-for-granted and seeming-to-know—and she knew all about the twin sons of La Mariposa the dancer, and Escarlata Inclán's girl, now, if you please, married into the family of de las Fuentes, with a coronet on the door of her coach!

All this knowledge, piling up inside María Pía, increased the barrier between her and her father, her and Madame Deschamps. She loved Santiago no less, but she had begun to fear the man in him, anticipating its effect upon her and her future; and she spoke no more of taking a house in Havana. It did not for a moment cross her mind that Santiago might marry again: that he should be capable of such an outrage on her mother's memory was beyond her imagination at this stage. But she felt that if he found a mistress, the whole—or the greater part of his attention—would inevitably be drawn away from her and the home in the country, and that she would exist, thenceforward, only on the periphery of her father's consciousness.

III

If the condesa de Coria thought to cheapen her niece's value by subjecting her to the dubious influences of the Aroche palace, if she thought to make María Pía's name so scandalous that it alienated prudent people, she greatly underrated the influence of the wise woman who watched over her charge with a devotion that could hardly have been deeper had María Pía been Madame Deschamps' daughter. The condesa laid many subtle traps, and some that were not so subtle: she sometimes arranged that María Pía went in to supper with someone who could be relied on to encourage her to drink too much, and, when there was dancing, invariably chose her partners from among the least desirable morally, although perhaps the most socially, of the company. She would deliberately introduce *risqué* subjects of conversation, and invite the telling of indelicate jokes—excusing this corruption of the girl's morals on the score of wishing to make her niece a woman of the world.

The two girls, María Pía de Lorchá and Leonor de Montalba, were seldom invited on the same occasions; nothing could have been greater than the condesa's discretion when her Montalba niece was present. Leonor, with her insipid virginal innocence, bored her aunt to tears, but it was not Isabela's way to neglect any pawn on her board. She was even arranging for Leonor to have riding lessons from the head de Coria groom, and spent hours in advising Doña Silvia how to smarten up her charge, and how to present her in general at the best advantage.

It is hard to account for the seeming lack of motive of some of Isabela's plotting, unless we remember that here was a woman who had lived for years upon a dream of vengeance: whose dream had carried her beyond the boundaries of reason, and whose lust was for power. She so hated María Pía that there was almost nothing she would not have done to make the girl suffer: but she had to proceed obliquely, because she knew that Santiago would have resented any ill-treatment of his daughter. And oh, how carefully she went with Santiago nowadays!

She had been so skilful and delicate with her approach to him, since María Cayetúña's death; she had wooed him as exquisitely as a lovesick mistress, sparing no pains to reassure him of her understanding and her devotion, and when he again began to visit her, she knew her battle was more than half won.

She could no longer gain influence over him through her beauty and her rivalry of his prowess in the saddle: but she could impress him with her far-seeing intelligence and her devotion to his interests and the interests of Buonaventura, and heaven knows how much circumlocution and advance and withdrawal there was before the day when she ventured to drop the first globule of poison into his mind: the poison that she had been brewing, even before María Cayetuña was dead.

"Ay, *hermano mio*, what sorrow that you have no son to follow you on our beautiful land!" It was said so gently that Santiago's eyes filled with tears. "What a pity that Julio Gamborena——!"

"Yes, indeed," he said heavily. Julio Gamborena was the only one of his three sons who might fittingly have succeeded; the twin boys of La Mariposa were, by now, down-town ruffians, the elder an indifferent bull-fighter, poisoned with syphilis, the younger an itinerant vender of vegetables. Nothing to be proud of there! "My daughter must provide me with the successor to Buonaventura; I have already spoken about it with Carlos Rodríguez—she will be told about it presently. It will not be difficult; she has known the Rodríguez all her life."

"Ah, yes: but the name of Rodríguez belongs to San Juan de Remedios; de Lorcha—Buonaventura; one cannot think of those two apart." She touched her lashes quickly. "Five generations—and then a change! It is hard."

"It is hard," he admitted, and she was too cunning to pursue the topic further. It was, of course, pure accident that, on his following visit, and on each successive one for a number of weeks, the pretty little Montalba girl of whom María Pía was jealous should happen to be present. Pretty, plump, like a dove! Santiago remembered that Isabela had wanted him to marry her mother. One could do no less than make amends by being attentive to the daughter, whose gravity and admirable recognition of the fact that her "uncle" was in mourning removed anything equivocal from the situation.

There were moments when the condesa tried, rather imprudently, to institute comparisons between Leonor and María Pía, to the former's advantage: but to these Santiago was unreceptive, and she had to acknowledge herself beaten in the attempt to create friction between him and his daughter. Still, the resolution grew in her that María Pía should not, while breath remained in her (Isabela's) body, inherit Buonaventura and the great English fortune which was now incorporated into the estates of de Lorcha.

The girl must be married off—richly if possible—and not to a Rodríguez: for once let the Rodríguez get their talons into the earth they long had coveted, and the powers of Satan would not make them let go! As wife of some elderly Cuban *roué*, with no taste for planting, her power—and Isabela was not so foolish as to discount the power of her enemies—would be ended; she would lapse back to the obscurity which was the pre-ordained lot of a quadroon. Don Ildefonso, on whom, as we have seen, the condesa's choice had fallen, was particularly suitable, since the dissoluteness of his career had left him *incápaz*, a state of affairs on which Isabela had taken pains to inform herself, from various ladies with whom, latterly, he had prosecuted his suit.

But before this pretty plan could be put into execution, Santiago must be settled. She did not flatter herself that he would welcome a son-in-law

nearly old enough to be his father, and who was certainly not capable of giving him a grandson—the very point on which, for the present, everything hung.

One can imagine Isabela, buzzing like a wasp between the palace, the Villa and the Montalba town house, driving her frightened little sister-in-law nearly crazy, writing long letters to Madrid—since Lucía, she declared, was not to be trusted to put matters in the proper light; giving her immense receptions, flattering one niece and exhorting the other, yet always finding time for those long, confidential talks, in the course of which, like a sorceress, she felt the tendrils of her influence gathering, as in the old days, about her brother, his confidence in her returning . . . until she began at last to descry on the horizon the approach of the moment when she dared to put, outright, her infamous proposition.

IV

"I am not a fool. Do you know what Tía Isabela's like? She's like one of those yellow *majas*, that lie quite still, pretending to be dead, but just getting ready to strike. And I pretend I don't know she's a *maja*, but I'm watching—all the time."

Under the unfinished colonnades of the mirador, which had just received its upper storey, all of the women of María Pía's household, black and white, were sitting in the shade, linked one to another around the central column by the great web of linen all were hemming. María Pía and Madame Deschamps sat on chairs in the middle, with their backs to the stonework, and outside, in the sunlight, squatted on their heels in the tireless negro fashion, were the sempstresses, a black border round the barrier of snowy white. María Pía's part was mainly to snap at any one who made a stitch too large or drew a thread too tight; Madame Deschamps was embroidering the monogram which marked all the newer de Lorcha linen, and the slaves took it in turns to sing or to tell stories—in which latter art Olimpo excelled.

The interruption, and María Pía's rapid utterance in French, was caused by the appearance of Santiago and his sister, walking slowly in the direction of the house, across the distant grass.

It was inevitable now for the condesa to move slowly: her little, puffed-up feet would hardly support her outrageously increased bulk—which she chose impudently to exaggerate by the bouffante gowns she wore. Santiago lent her his arm, and with the other hand she managed a jewelled stick that she raised and shook playfully at her scowling niece.

"What are you doing?" said Madame Deschamps quickly.

It was a moment before María Pía replied; her black brows drawn down, her teeth set together, the answer came like a hiss.

"You see that white feather over there, on the edge of the grass? I've made it oeah. If Tía Isabela comes this side of it, she will be burned to a cinder!"

"Do not talk nonsense, *ma chère*——"

"There! She avoids it! There—she is going in the other direction!"

María Pía drew a deep breath of triumph. "You saw? She felt the obeh—"

"Your aunt has chosen, as she might be expected to do, the shortest way to the house. That's all that your charm amounts to! And it is imprudent of you to use the other word, with all these listening ears about us." She inclined her head slightly sideways towards the sewing women, whose even rhythm had given way to a faint, alert uneasiness, although none of them could understand what María Pía had said, excepting the one word

"It was the—charm, I tell you! And what's the use of being a quadroom unless one knows a trick to use on things like Tía Isabela?"

"*Tais-toi, ma chérie*; you may be a quadroom, but you are also a good Catholic. It is also your duty," she added, with less conviction, "as mistress of the house to descend and welcome your aunt to the Villa."

"I'll leave that to Papa! There they go, towards his office. Why are they always going into rooms and shutting doors? They've got some secret, and, what's more, I believe Papa's ashamed of it. So he ought to be! How dare he have secrets with her, and not with me?"

Her eyes were bright with resentment. Suddenly she rose, thrust the folds of linen violently from her knees, and telling the negro women to get on with their work—"Olimpo is in charge, and if you idle or scamp your work I'll whip the lot of you!"—she strode out into the sun, pulling the collar of her gown away from her throat as if it choked her, and, with a trick familiar from her childhood, pushing the black bush of her hair up from the nape of her neck, to let the air get to it.

After a moment's hesitation, Madame Deschamps followed her. To her surprise María Pía made for the tall palms that the negroes had endowed with a "haunt." There was nothing to mark Gabriel's grave, but María Pía always declared it must be at the foot of the second tree from the left, where the ground, though barren, was very even, and there was always, even on the hottest days, a patch of shade. She spread her petticoats and sat down on the warm earth, pressing the palms of her hands into its dry dustiness, and stared in front of her for a long time before she spoke.

"I think I had better be getting on with this marriage."

"What marriage, *ma chère*?" Madame Deschamps was startled.

"Why, my own, of course! It is a great nuisance, because there were so many things I wanted to see and do first, before settling down for good on Buenaventura. I would have liked, for instance, to travel a little; to visit some of the other islands—Barbados, for instance, and those English relatives Mama spoke about: the brothers and sisters of this one here"—she patted the earth on which she was sitting, and looked at the backs of her hands, covered with the pale grey dust. "I think I will put up a stone, one day, for this one," she added in parenthesis. "I should have liked to go to England—to Bristol—and see Mama's family. One is none the worse for a little travel, is one? I think that is one of the things that are the matter with us here: we are too closed in, and ignorant about everything except ourselves."

"But I see I shall have to give all that up. I've got to stop and keep my eye on things here."

"Then have you made up your mind whom you will marry?"

"I suppose it will be Carlos Rodríguez." She shrugged her shoulders.

"He is older than I am, but I like him very well, and I suppose it is a good thing to marry someone you have known all your life. I think Carlos will give me good children"—again she paused. "And that is all that really matters, isn't it?"

It was, as Madame Deschamps knew well, the spirit in which most Cuban women approached marriage; but for some reason she found herself deploring it for María Pía.

"There's one thing I do know about Carlos," said María Pía sturdily, "and that is, he'll stand no nonsense from Tía Isabela. I know as sure as we are sitting here that she is up to some mischief with Papa, and I have a shrewd idea it is to do with Buonaventura. The only way to scotch that is for me to get married; and then she will have a nephew as well as a niece to deal with! It's lucky, isn't it, that I haven't fallen in love with any one already? For it would certainly not have been Carlos, and I very much doubt it would have been a planter. I may get quite fond of him if we have some children. . . . Were you in love when you were married?" she broke off to ask.

"Certainly; but not with my husband," said Madame Deschamps calmly. "To be in love with one's husband is a luxury which is given to very few; never forget that."

"Papa and Mama were in love."

"They were, *ma petite*; love such as your parents bore to one another is a very rare and beautiful thing."

"Do you think Papa is beginning to forget Mama?" asked María Pía.

Madame Deschamps paused before answering, with careful moderation:

"I think that is very unlikely."

"It *might* happen?" Her voice sounded strained.

"*Ma chérie*." Madame Deschamps laid her arm lightly round the girl's shoulders and gave them an understanding pressure. "When one has lost someone one dearly loves, it does not mean that the power to love is gone. The love will never be the same, of course; and perhaps it will not be true love at all. But unless the heart is of stone, it must respond, after the first anguish, to sentiments it evokes in other people. If your father had ceased to love after your mother died, it would mean he did not even love you." She knew that for once she had failed in honesty; she knew by the flicker in the other's eyes that María Pía recognized the failure.

"All my life," said María Pía presently, "I have thought of Papa as a strong man. I have admired and looked up to him, as the very image of all that a strong man ought to be."

"You were right to do so," said Madame Deschamps loyally.

"Yes—but lately . . . Don't tell me you have not noticed it. Tía Isabela is getting him more and more under her thumb; he seems to listen to no one but her. Look how she flatters him! Yet I can remember them quarrelling like cat and dog when Mama was alive. Now nothing she does can be wrong. He goes to all her parties; he's almost given up playing cards at the Ferrobancos; he lets her surround him with women—I tell you, Papa is getting his head turned!"

Madame Deschamps could not forbear a smile at this *naïveté*.

"I hardly think at his age——"

"That is what makes it all the more ridiculous!" pointed out María Pía scornfully. "I suppose the Oliveira woman and that new Mexican one have got something—but when it comes to that smirking fool of a Leonor—so full of her secret betrothal she's unbearable—I declare I can hardly refrain from telling Papa what an exhibition he's making of himself!"

"No—no: you must say nothing. It would be most unbecoming of you to speak to your father on such a subject," Madame Deschamps said hurriedly.

"Not more unbecoming than his own conduct," muttered María Pía. "What *are* those Montalbas up to with Leonor? I suppose it's just another of Tía Isabela's plots, that everybody seems to give way to, as if she were Almighty God himself! I trust her," said María Pía, "just the length of my little finger. I can't see what she's after, but I'm ready. I'm ready—for anything!"

"Are you, my poor child?" But she did not say it aloud; her look, as it lingered on María Pía, was deeply maternal. She was aware of, and surprised by it, for she had never looked on herself as a maternal woman.

"At any rate, I have quite made up my mind to marry Carlos, but I shall not tell Papa for a few days. Next week Tía Isabela goes off to visit that friend of hers at Matanzas; he won't be able to talk it over with her, for once, and it will be a nice snub when she comes back and finds it is all settled, without any of her interference," said María Pía, jumping up. But she paused and looked down while shaking the dust off her skirts. "I am sorry I cannot go to England. . . ."

V

Downstairs, in the parlour where once María Cayetuña had rocked her baby, the condesa de Coria was saying to her brother:

"Who indeed in their right minds could dream that you were anything but faithful to your wife's memory? On that account, believe me, you need not have an instant's qualm. *Madre mia!* You were known all over the island as a model husband!"

"Heaven thought fit to vouchsafe me a model wife," he answered her. There was something comfortable, something that ministered to his self-respect, in thus giving María Cayetuña her dues.

"I was mistaken; I own it." Isabela knew it was the moment for prostration. "Every day of my life I reproach myself, I ask to be forgiven for my blindness and lack of understanding. If I could but have drawn near to her at the last!—but you know it was she, Santiago," she said, on a soft note of self-reproachful regret, "who would not have it."

"She was too ill to know what she was doing," Santiago consoled her.

"Think how she grieved that she had never given you a son! I know all about it, for Lucía has told me. 'Supposing,' Lucía once had the hardihood to ask her—you know, Lucía is very stupid; but your wife was devoted to her—'Supposing Santiago had a son by another woman?'"

"What was her answer?" Santiago was startled; he had not heard of this conversation between the marquesa and María Cayetuña.

"She answered—Lucía said it was like a saint: she answered, 'For his sake, I should love the child as though it were my own.'"

Had he not been drunk with the mandragora of Isabela's scheming, Santiago would have known it was the last answer María Cayetuña could possibly have made. Her discovery that he was the father of Asunción Gamborena's son had been the bitterest shock of her early married life, and the fact of her inability to give him a son in wedlock had only been made tolerable to her by Santiago's changeless fidelity. Yet all his masculine strength, and the intelligence that accompanied it, was dissolved in the machinations of a scheming woman. He allowed a current of relief to flow through him, to obliterate the sense of guilt he at first felt, in listening to Isabela's careful suggestions.

None other than Isabela would have been allowed to make them; but latterly he had felt the re-establishment, between himself and his sister, of that close devotion that went back to their childhood. It was Isabela who really knew and understood him, to whom he could speak with an intimacy he had hardly given to María Cayetuña; an intimacy based on their complete knowledge of each other. Together, they had nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to conceal, nothing to explain; an ideality of relationship which is rarely arrived at in marriage—which had not existed between himself and his wife on account of the wide separation of their outlook on matters of religion, and of María Cayetuña's failure to understand and sympathise in his work on the plantation and ranch. Beyond their love and passion there had been, between María Cayetuña and himself, really nothing; he recognized it with astonishment, now, in turning to Isabela.

"*Es verdad?* That is what she said?"

"Upon my honour, that is what she said." Her hard, bright eyes stared into his, as though to compel his belief.

"Ay, it was a good woman." He allowed a sigh to break from him, which Isabela echoed.

"There are few as good," she nodded.

There was a silence, in which Santiago drummed with his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"Perhaps, as time goes on——"

She braced herself instantly, to meet this procrastinating attitude, which she had known was to be feared.

"Time? You are forty-seven; by the time your son is twenty you will be nearly as old as Papa," she said quickly.

"My son?"

"If you were to marry soon—say, in the course of the coming year," she followed up her advantage. He flung up his hand, and she knew she had gone too fast.

"I have a daughter; her affairs must come before mine."

"Listen," she whispered, and her fingers closed on his wrist. "Do you really wish the Rodríguez to come to own Buonaventura?"

CHAPTER XIX

I

"Oh, stop making such a fuss! You'd think you were the only woman in the world who ever had a baby!"

"You're so unkind, Isabela! If your teeth and your back ached as mine do, and you daren't look what a fright you were in the glass, you'd not say such things!"

"There, there," said Isabela, relenting. "I only want you to pull yourself together. Think what a wonderful time you'll be having this time next year, at the court of Spain! I don't know any one who's got a better reason for getting better than you have."

"I'm just as likely to die," whimpered Lucía, who indeed had a good deal to cry about. She had suffered far more than she had done, even over the twins, and dreaded her rapidly approaching confinement. When Isabela came to her she was crawling restlessly from one seat to another in the *sala*, her undressed hair hung in sweat-clotted streaks about her little, blotched face; she looked no better, thought Isabela, than the street sluts when they got into her condition. She thought with satisfaction of her own averted pregnancies; she at least had managed to defeat nature, which had no more respect for the high than for the low.

"You're not going to die," said Isabela cheerfully. "Far from it, you'll be ready to jump over the moon when you hear the news I've brought you."

Poor Lucía, who could hardly raise a foot to step over a footstool, was little likely to jump over the moon. As she raised her eyes to her sister-in-law's flushed and sparkling face her lips blanched.

"It's—it's happened?"

The condesa nodded delightedly, and pushed the heavy lace of the mantilla back from her thick neck and bosom.

"For goodness' sake stop crawling about, and let us sit on the gallery; it is as hot as an oven in here!"

"Santiago——?"

"He has agreed." Isabela cast an impatient glance at her sister-in-law and walked out on to the marble gallery, below which was the patio with its pomegranate trees, its mignonette and myrtles. "If you won't sit down I can't make you, and I shall have to yell to you from here!" She lifted her voice with her usual careless disregard—except when it suited her to be confidential—of who might overhear her. "It's all settled at last, and the wedding can take place next year."

"*Por dios*, Isabela!" Lucía dragged herself to the door, and stood panting, supporting herself, with her hand to her heart. "Don't tell the household!"

Isabela laughed gleefully.

"I don't care who hears; but the two people it most concerns are yourself and Leonor. Where is she? I must really kiss the child, her behaviour's been quite exemplary. Look what I've brought her!" Diving into her handbag,

the condesa produced a long chain of cut rubies joined together with links of gold. Lucía knew it was an ornament her sister-in-law had never cared for; she tried to force her trembling lips into expressions of thanks, and burst helplessly into tears.

"Don't be such a fool, Lucía! What have you to cry for?" said Isabela contemptuously. "Your daughter's going to make a marriage that every girl in Havana will envy her! She's going to have two places in the country, and I can trust Leonor to see herself fixed up suitably with a house in town. She'll be the most influential woman in Havana—after myself, of course," she broke off to laugh.

"Does María Pía know?" sobbed Lucía.

"What does it matter what that *mestiza* knows?" sneered Isabela.

"You have always hated María Pía, but I love her as I loved her mother. I cannot bear to think how she will suffer over this."

"She will soon get over her suffering," said Isabela dryly. "Don Ildefonso will see to that. Oh, yes; there's quite a spoke in the Rodríguez wedding for the present! I had young Carlos here the other day, and gave him to understand certain things——"

"You didn't!" Lucía stopped crying to look with eyes of horror at the condesa. "But any one in Havana could give you the lie!" she whispered. "Every one knows the girl goes nowhere without Madame Deschamps——!"

"And I suppose it has never been known, in the history of Havana, for a girl to escape from her dueña for an hour?" mocked Isabela. "I can assure you, plenty of people have remarked on the way she has been flirting with Don Ildefonso, and her character's not so sound as you seem to think."

"If it is so, it is your fault, Isabela!" said Lucía bravely.

"Ca, don't let's have accusations," said the condesa, too satisfied with the success of her scheming to be ill-tempered. "Come and sit down, and I will tell you where we have got to in our arrangements. Santiago will be coming to see you, probably this evening, but I told him I would see you first and prepare you for his pleasant surprise! (And I hope you'll do your hair and make up your face, Lucía, before he arrives: as it's certainly discouraging for a man to be received by a dowdy mother-in-law!)" She burst into noisy laughter. "To think of your being Santiago's mother-in-law! Well, it serves you right, you silly little thing, for if you had backed me up properly twenty years ago, you could certainly have been his wife."

Lucía wiped her eyes, but she was trembling from head to foot as she sat down in the chair which Isabela thrust forward. María Pía, the child she had sworn always to love, for the sake of her beloved mother!

"Of course, it's all to be kept quiet for the present; Santiago is conventional in some ways——" The condesa grimaced. "And, of course, it is rather early for the marriage to take place; but you can't keep a girl tied up for ever, and I am sure Leonor has been very patient and sensible up to now! I told Santiago it was not right to keep her waiting any longer. So he agreed to have the wedding next Easter——"

"No, no, not Easter!"

"Why not?"

"Don't you know? It's the anniversary of his wife's death."

"Caramba, I had forgotten that," said Isabela, who had not mentioned an

Easter wedding to Santiago, but whose carelessness of convention stopped short of re-marrying a man on his first wife's death-day. "What a pity; Easter weddings are so fashionable. Still, we can have it at Pentecost."

"But I—I shall have gone to Europe by then." She did not know whether to be glad or sorry; it was a pity to miss the wedding of one's only daughter, and yet Lucía felt she could not have endured the tortured face of María Pía on such an occasion. If only—if only they would keep it secret from María Pía until she had gone!

"Of course you will. Never mind. You will find enough gaiety to make up for missing a Havanese wedding!" said Isabela enviously. "And I, of course, will have Leonor to stay with me until the ceremony is over. What fun we shall have choosing her clothes! They must be started now—and I hope you will see well to her linen chest; there's been so much thieving at Buonaventura since Papa was there alone that I don't suppose we have more than twenty pairs of sheets left in the house. Of course the mulatress brought nothing with her! A nice thing for a man to have to stock his home with his own linen."

"Whatever she did not bring, she made ample amends for it later!"

"I don't know why you are so disposed to quarrel with me," said Isabela with her slow, evil smile. "I have arranged a wonderful marriage for your daughter, and, I can tell you, Leonor at least is grateful! You know, I believe she's quite in love with him. I've noticed the romantic looks she gives him when he isn't looking—oh, yes, she's been a pattern of discretion from beginning to end, and I must give you credit for knowing how to bring up a daughter. Well, now you must ring the bell, and we will have the child in, and tell her her anxiety is all at an end. . . ."

II

"Papa, will you come and look at the *mirador*? They have nearly finished it; there is only the tiling to be laid under the columns." She spoke coaxingly, even a little timidly. She had such a longing, these days, for her father's confidence that it had almost blotted out her usual cheerful self-assurance and the bold approach that had always delighted her father.

Santiago turned round and looked at her. These days he was almost like a man in a dream. Actually, he was a man who had surrendered his manhood into the hands of an evil woman, and although, blind with trust, he never doubted that Isabela was acting for the best, both of himself and of Buonaventura, he regarded his coming marriage without enthusiasm, and with nothing but a good-humoured, somewhat paternal feeling for the girl who had promised to become his wife. But his heart was very heavy for his daughter. He knew how difficult it would be to make María Pía see his point of view; she whom he had brought up in such awareness of her duty to Buonaventura that she had taken almost as a matter of course the Rodríguez alliance—which had not yet, by the way, been formally confirmed—was little likely to take kindly to the idea of her displacement by the half-brother he had made up his mind to give her.

Isabela had touched him in his weakest spot when she played on the depar-

ture of the name of de Lorch from Buonaventura. It might still be that fortune would play him false: that he would not have a son. But that seemed unlikely. Leonor was young enough to have many children; she was healthy, and came of prolific stock.

The only point on which Santiago had taken a strong line had been in absolutely forbidding his sister, Leonor and her mother to tell María Pía what had been arranged. "It is for me to tell my daughter, at the time I choose," he said; and Isabela knew when it was unwise to go against her brother. She swore Lucía and Leonor to silence—a promise the former made most thankfully, and Leonor pettishly, for she was longing to exert her rights of step-mother over her cousin.

And now his heart trembled, for he knew the moment could no longer be put off.

"*Si, hija,*" he answered, so gently and lovingly that María Pía's face became radiant; it was so long since her father had spoken to her like that—as though he and she were the only two people in the world. They went arm in arm slowly down the garden, she pointing out to him various changes they had made in the bedding-out plants: for when Santiago walked in the garden it was always with an air of blindness, and he acknowledged the things she pointed out to him with an air of surprise. Once he stopped and, drawing her to him, kissed her very gently on the forehead. Raising her head in surprise, María Pía saw that her father's eyes were full of tears; she pressed his hand closely to her side, and went on with more happiness in her heart than had been there for many months.

"Look, isn't it pretty? Those little archways are very graceful, are they not? And the seat is quite comfortable—try it. Is not there a beautiful view of the house from here? I'm sure there is nothing so pretty in the whole of Cuba."

She made him count the pigeon-holes in the octagonal *palomar*:

"The doves are coming next week; Adán is seeing to it. He has a cousin in town who breeds them. The windows look out north, south, east and west," she added breathlessly, "and from the western one you can just see the ocean! But come upstairs, Papa: I have something particular to show you."

At the head of the stairs she turned and held out her hand.

"I want you to shut your eyes: take hold of my hand and I will guide you." She led him, her heart beating quickly, into the core, the whole meaning, of the *mirador*.

For a moment she stood looking round her at the scene she and Madame Deschamps with such devotion had created: then she bade him open his eyes.

Santiago opened his eyes, gazed round him for a moment with the half-dazed look of one who comes suddenly from darkness into light, then, as his eyes took in the full purport of his surroundings, they widened, with a kind of horror, and he clapped his hand to his lips as though to hold back a cry.

Well might he do so; for she had collected there everything she could find that had belonged to María Cayetúña. There was the chaise-longue in which she had lain, to hold her little girl on her knee, and María Pía's own wooden cradle, with its carved hood and rockers, and the furnishings that María Cayetúña, in the days while her baby was coming, had adorned with her own exquisite convent needlework. There was the guitar, which lay on the chaise-

longe as though just abandoned by its owner, with a few sheets of music that María Cayetuña had begun to copy under Gabriel's tuition: the carefully ruled staves, the groups of black and red notes ended half-way down the page, as though this project had been interrupted.

On the table lay her scrap-books, filled with the little holy pictures which were all she had brought with her in her flight from Santa Clara: each one in a faded frame of pressed leaves and flowers. There were the shawls which Santiago bought his bride in Jamaica, their knitted fringes and flights of birds and sprays of blossom trailing delicately over the backs of the light furniture which Madame Deschamps had suggested as suitable for this pleasant parlour, and here and there a fan or a handkerchief of lace dropped carelessly, as she dropped them when she was living.

Upon the wall bracket they had taken from her bedroom stood the little ivory madonna with the tenderly drooping head, and María Cayetuña's rosary of gold and amber knotted about her feet, and hanging on the back of the *prie-dieu*, one of those little muslin caps on which she had always been stitching until the needle grew too heavy for her weary hands. And although these things were all mementoes of the dead, they had been arranged with such loving skill that there was no air of death about them; one could fancy at any moment the rustle of a muslin gown on the stairs, see her light entrance, and the hand outstretched to pick up one of her pomanders and the little smile with which she enjoyed its fragrance of orange and clove. And beyond the remembered beauty of that physical presence there was something more: an emanation for the past that stood to María Pía for all the tender and loving care, the sweet dependence, the latter-day helplessness of the *muñeca*-Mama—the little Mama-doll—which was folded into her heart.

"Isn't it a pleasant place, Papa?" María Pía spoke with deliberate calmness, to steady her father's emotion. "We shall always be able to sit here and think about Mama, and feel that she has not gone so very far away from us, after all."

His face was suffused with blood, his chest heaved, he held his hands pressed to his sides as though they could hold in the violence of emotion that threatened to burst him asunder; then, with a noise that was half a sob and half a groan, he turned and plunged blindly down the stairs. She could hear the noise of his weeping through the floor, and ran after, to comfort him.

"No, no—leave me—let me be alone!"

Yet as she went from him, as his red-rimmed eyes followed her straight back and high head through the lemon groves, he had the impulse to call after her; to humble himself, to cry: "Forgive me!—for I have sinned against heaven and before thee!" His re-marriage now seemed to him a sin . . . but a sin he could not confess to the one most deeply injured by it.

III

Madame Deschamps should have been the one to tell her. Santiago knew it. No one was better fitted, by her love and knowledge of the girl, to bear the brunt of that awful announcement. But from Madame Deschamps, latterly, he had a distinct aversion. Her manners were, as always, impeccable, but

there was recrimination in her eyes. Sometimes he suspected her of knowing; but in that case she would surely have said something, given some hint, that would have betrayed her knowledge. He felt her ranged on María Pía's side, against him; and in this he did her much less than justice, for Madame Deschamps would have done anything, made any personal sacrifice, to prevent a breach between Santiago and his daughter. She knew, even better than they, their deep need of, and dependence on, each other.

It was guilt that made Santiago turn from her and go to his mother-in-law to be: to poor Lucía, who, now perilously near her time, shrank in horror from the charge he laid upon her.

"I tell her? *Sancta María*, how can you ask me to do such a thing?"

"She loves you," said Santiago obstinately. "You stand to her in the place of her mother." It was an exaggeration, and he knew it; no one would ever stand in the place of María Cayetuña, for either of them. But it seemed to cast a veil of decency over his cowardice. "I will send her to you," he said firmly, and left her.

María Pía and Madame Deschamps rode on horseback into Havana. It was a perfect summer morning, in a sky of rapturous blue the orioles were performing their exquisite, aerial mating, the sea was a vast, cut sapphire, tossing the sunlight from its million facets, the surf rolled snow-white in the wake of the heavy-topped ships, crowded with their utmost burden of canvas. Havana lay pearl-rosy in its hollow, cool to the eye, but, as they began the descent of the hill, exuding the ancient, sweaty, odorous heat of its close alleys like a miasma which crawled among the grasses of the rising land.

María Pía was wearing the white Andalusian jacket, a full riding-skirt of crimson cotton material, and a broad straw hat knotted with ribbons beneath her chin; she looked almost beautiful. The sun gilded and lent depth to her sallow flesh, the broad blackness of her brows enhanced the darkness of her eyes, and the folded scarlet sash the slimness of her waist. Madame Deschamps, whose head was aching, stiffened her spine; it was against her code of good manners to display weariness in public, but she would, for once, have given much to remain in her bed, instead of undertaking this morning ride with her charge, to whom her tired eyes turned again and again with an expression of love and foreboding. The premonition that was upon her seemed, however, in no way to affect María Pía.

"What a morning! When we have called on Tía Lucía we won't linger about Havana, will we? I want to see how that new lot of Papa's calves is shaping for the *tentadero*."

"Just as you please."

"Poor Tía Lucía! It must be an awful nuisance to be having a baby at her age," said María Pía cheerfully. She turned in the saddle and motioned the groom to close up behind them, for they were now entering the outskirts of the town, and no lady rode in Havana without the close attendance of her servants.

Doña Silvia received them in the patio; to María Pía's satisfaction, there were no signs of Leonor. Doña Silvia and Madame Deschamps were friendly, in the airy, controlled fashion of those who appreciate their adversaries' steel. It was Doña Silvia's business to stand up for her charge, Leonor, and Madame Deschamps needed no prompting to support María Pía on any occasion of

comparison between the two. They greeted each other and Doña Silvia instantly pressed Madame Deschamps to take chocolate with her in the patio.

"María Pía will go up and see her aunt; *ay-di-mi*, the poor Doña Lucía is suffering this morning!"

"The baby hasn't started coming yet, has it?" asked María Pía as she lifted her riding-skirt and prepared to mount the wide, marble stair.

"No, no." But it struck both women that Doña Silvia's face wore an expression of embarrassment that was almost sly. María Pía shrugged her shoulders, clasped her gloves and her crop and ran upstairs.

The heat and darkness of her aunt's bedroom for a moment took her aback. The shutters were tightly closed, and only thin golden lines of sunshine showed where the windows were; a stifling aroma of burnt perfume caught her by the throat and made her cough sharply.

"Are you here, Tía Lucía?" It was impossible to see anything in the pitch-dark room, but a moan came from the bed on which the Marquesa presumably lay. "Dear Aunt, shan't I leave the door open? It's like a cell in here!"

"No, no—no door, no window!" groaned Lucía. "Come—come: oh, my poor darling, let me put my arms about you!"

Closing the door, María Pía advanced with growing uneasiness towards the bed, which, as her eyes accustomed themselves, slowly developed itself, with its immense hangings, from the gloom. She saw her aunt's head, smothered about with lace, the crumpled sheets and coverings, and, sitting down, she found Lucía's small, burning hand and held it firmly.

"I think you should have the doctor."

"No, no—*madre mia*, what is the use of a doctor? Oh, my poor darling, that I have cried about and prayed about all the night——!" She seemed hardly to know what she was saying, moving her head and her shoulders with agonized movements that seemed partly to derive from physical, partly from mental pain.

In the patio the conversation of the dueñas halted, creaked, failed and struggled onward. Each watched the other, suspecting her of knowledge while not daring to assume it; Madame Deschamps' fine, well-bred features were grey, as though lightly powdered with dust, and she looked, for once, all of her age; she imposed a great strain on herself to preserve her aristocratic calm, while Doña Silvia fluttered, stammered, repeated herself and tried with foolish little observations about the weather and the cage-birds—who added their ceaseless restlessness to the vibration of the atmosphere—to create an impression of careless gaiety, which did not deceive her companion.

The patio simmered lightly, the fountains plashed, the gilt bells on the corners of the cages tinkled as the birds hopped about, servants crossed and re-crossed on shuffling bare feet, a beggar came to the grille and was driven away by the doorkeeper—and the clock of La Merced struck a sonorous *eleven* almost over their heads. Madame Deschamps looked up at the blue square of sky and fanned herself with deliberate slowness.

The crash of an iron latch brought both women to their feet: the clink of spurred heels on marble. All of her worst apprehensions came to life as Madame Deschamps, looking upward, saw María Pía leaning upon the balustrade.

"*Ma chère——*"

"Where is Leonor?" Speaking to Doña Silvia, she ignored her governess.

"*Por dios*—how—how do I know?" stammered Doña Silvia, in evident terror.

She was coming down the stairs, creeping like a tigress, her eyes burning yellow with their purpose, the crop gripped in her right hand. She crossed the patio flags like a tigress, her eyes fixed on the shrinking Doña Silvia, who, in her alarm, dodged behind Madame Deschamps.

"Where is that little—*puta*?" As Doña Silvia remained speechless, she added, in a voice like the crack of a whip: "Come: you are paid, aren't you, to know?" She spoke as a man, as her English grandfather might have spoken, with brutal indifference to all but the answer to her question.

Madame Deschamps laid her hand on a forearm that was like iron.

"*Es-tu folle, mon enfant? N'oublies pas ta pauvre tante*—"

María Pía's eyes went across the top of her head as though she did not exist.

"There she is!" Heaven knows what instinct of simpering triumph brought Leonor, at this moment, out on the balcony—all be-veiled and be-combed, as though going to mass—to smirk down upon the cousin she so deeply had wronged. She was not a courageous girl, but on this occasion self-satisfaction was too much for her. "There she is—the dirty little tool! With her dirty little paws that she uses for pulling Tía Isabela's chestnuts out of the fire!" María Pía was not speaking loudly, her voice had sunk to a metallic purr, which evidently conveyed no especial warning to the pink-faced Leonor, who put her head on one side as though she were receiving compliments.

"Yes, you will have to apologize for those things later," she simpered. "I shall see your father makes you apologize. You won't say and do what you like, you know, now I'm going to be your stepmother!" A taunt which ended in a squeak, for María Pía, who during her cousin's speech had been drawing nearer and nearer to the foot of the stairs, suddenly leapt up them with a speed that took them all by surprise. Leonor, turning to flee, slipped and twisted one of her high heels; María Pía was equally handicapped by treading on her skirt, which she seized and ripped from hem to waist as though it were paper.

"Doña Silvia—for God's sake—the poor marquesa!" gasped Madame Deschamps.

Cut off by her blunder from bolting into her mother's room, as she intended, Leonor fled screaming round the gallery, pursued by María Pía. The two horror-stricken women were obliged to witness the capture: Doña Silvia falling on her knees in the patio, Madame Deschamps running as fast as she could up the stairs in answer to Lucia's pitiful cries.

As she felt the fat, cushiony flesh under her hands, María Pía thought, for a moment, to commit murder. As she wrenched the comb and the veil from the other girl's head and tossed them into the patio, she gloated on the prospect of cutting that fat, chapetone flesh into ribbons with the crop that she gripped in her hand. Clutching Leonor's shoulder, she brought down the whip and grinned at the shriek that came from her cousin. Twisting like an eel, however, Leonor managed to free her flesh, and the stuff of her bodice ripped away in the other girl's hand. As María Pía lifted the whip for another

stroke, Leonor lowered her head and, using a trick she and her brothers had practised on one another in their childhood, butted María Pía so violently in the stomach that the latter yelped with pain; and, while María Pía was doubled over her anguished solar plexus, Leonor scuttled away.

Madame Deschamps knelt by Lucía's bed, holding the trembling body in her arms, trying to soothe her, to shut out with her hands the noises that came from the gallery. Both shrank as the tall figure staggered in the doorway, clutching for support at its carved posts, before lurching across the room. María Pía flung herself across her aunt's feet, and her sobbing racked the hearts of the two listening women.

"How could you—how could you let it happen? How could you help them to betray me?" was the most poignant of the accusations she flung, from the depths of her wounded heart, at the two who, above all others, would have spared her, if it had been possible for them to do so.

IV

Santiago and his daughter faced each other coldly from opposite sides of the room. All trace of emotion had been removed from her face, which was as cold and set as marble. He affected a dignified severity which he was far from feeling; he resented, because he had wronged her. He had not foreseen this cold, reserved María Pía, who kept her lids obstinately lowered and addressed him with studious respect. Tears he had expected: passion, wild reproaches, rage, hysteria; but the girl who stood before him was a stranger. She referred in the briefest possible manner to his forthcoming marriage, formally wishing him happiness. He ground his teeth, guessing correctly that she had been coached by Madame Deschamps. She had the manners, suddenly, of an *infanta*—this dispossessed daughter of the house of de Lorchá!

"Since I have no further share in your plans for the future, Papa, may I take it that I am not obliged to marry Carlos Rodríguez?"

He started. This had been an intrinsic part of his planning, the sop he had laid to his conscience. Carlos was a good fellow, who could be trusted to make an affectionate husband. Surely the girl did not prefer to remain at home, under the authority of a stepmother whom she disliked? Santiago knitted his brows at the prospect of so awkward a future.

"You are 'obliged' to do nothing," he answered, with a deliberate gentleness. "But, *hija*, you would do well to consider before setting Carlos aside. You will be affectionately received in the Rodríguez family, and you will take an important place in society when the old people are dead. It is a good marriage; do not forget that, and the Rodríguez will look upon it in the same light; because, although you may not inherit Buonaventura, I have taken good care of my daughter." He explained stiffly to her the portion of her mother's fortune which had been set aside for her: it was a very large one. She thanked him coldly.

"I fully understand, Papa, the advantages of marrying Carlos, and appreciate his many good qualities. But since the marriage was to have been entirely a matter of convenience, and it can now, so far as we are concerned, fulfil no good purpose, may we not regard it as a closed subject?"

"Of course," mumbled Santiago, hating a situation in which he felt himself at a disadvantage, "your home is yours, as long as you wish to remain in it."

Her mouth twitched, and the silver line of her teeth sank suddenly into the full lower lip. She paused before replying:

"Many thanks. But I've got another plan which, subject to your approval, Papa, would, I think, work out more agreeably for all concerned. When Tía Lucía goes to Spain, I should like to go with her."

"To Spain?" He stood aghast.

"Why not? My aunt is willing to take me. I have always longed to travel abroad."

"But—but——" he stammered clumsily. "What should I—what should this place—do without you?"

"You should have thought of that, Papa," she flashed back at him, "before making it impossible for me to stay here."

His mind was painfully confused, between the shock of losing her and the shameful recognition that her departure would remove a cause of continual embarrassment. Had he been called upon to tell the truth, he must have sworn that there was no comparison between his love for María Pía and his sentiment for the girl to whom he was betrothed. Beyond being lightly amused by Leonor, admiring her plump prettiness, he hardly gave the girl a thought, while María Pía had burned in his consciousness from the hour he agreed to Isabela's proposal. But María Pía could not give him a son, and he was obsessed with the idea of having a son; he wanted to have a son soon, so that he himself might still be young and vigorous while the boy was growing up, and play the leading part in his training. He could not, however, immediately bring himself to consent to this proposition; he told her that he must think it over—which, as María Pía knew, meant that he must talk about it with the condesa. She had little to fear from opposition in that quarter! she thought bitterly. There could be no measure more completely to the condesa's heart than this means of disposing of a niece she hated. "She wins all along the line," she thought; but although she herself had placed the final ace in her enemy's hand, she could not bring herself to regret a decision which no power on earth should make her revoke.

She and Leonor never met again; invariably, on her cousin's visits, which now took place openly as future mistress of the Villa, María Pía took herself with Madame Deschamps to Buonaventura, or rode out across the savanna, whose every fold and curve now seemed to stamp itself on her brain; every day became a series of unspoken farewells. Lucía's long, painful confinement took place, and although María Pía wrote daily to her aunt, and sent gifts each time a messenger went into Havana, she begged to be excused from visiting until the marquesa was well enough to dispense with her daughter's attendance. For the christening of the baby she sent a golden cup, and her own christening robe, worked from neck to hem with little bouquets of flowers; praying her aunt to return it to her later, for it was María Cayetuña's loveliest masterpiece. Lucía wept with gratitude over it, although Leonor sneered, and wanted to replace it with the historic robe of lace in which all the Montalba children were christened. But Lucía for once was firm. She was glad the baby was a girl, for she had almost ceased to feel that Leonor was her own child; she was shocked each day by the girl's bitter heartlessness, her indecent

triumph over her cousin. Lucía prayed that God might spare her from coming to hate her own daughter.

María Pía only once betrayed her own feeling to Santiago. It cost her much, in the sacrifice of the pride which alone, it seemed, remained to support her through those bitter days.

"Papa," she said, a few days before she was due to leave: when all the upper rooms and landings were crowded with the immense trunks that contained her and Madame Deschamps' possessions—for she had deliberately stripped the house of every last trace of herself, and to Santiago, not daring to comment, it seemed as though the earth was closing over the past. "Papa, there are two keys to the *mirador*; one I am taking with me, the other I will leave with you, on a condition."

Against her will, her voice trembled as she went on.

"Will you promise me that no one but yourself shall ever go into the *mirador*? I have closed the shutters, and put plenty of spices in to keep away the moth: but the windows should be opened now and again. Will you see to that yourself—until I come back again?"

"You—will come?" The agony of hesitation in his voice nearly broke her down; she curtsied quickly, drawing his hand to her lips; the traces of her tears lay upon it when she went away.

In the year 1798 the ship *Gloria de España* sailed from Havana to the port of Sevilla. In the list of its passengers appeared the names of the marquesa de Montalba and infant, the señorita María Pía de Lorcha, the señorita Doña Silvia de Arcos and Madame Deschamps, beside a number of male and female attendants who travelled with this distinguished party.

This was the year following that in which a young English gentleman of the name of Beaufort Sax left his father's mansion of Paragon, between Bath and Bristol, in the county of Gloucester, as attaché to a diplomatic mission addressed to the court of Madrid—whose results appeared in the Treaty of March 27, 1802: by which time, it may be added, neither María Pía nor Beaufort were worrying much about diplomacies. . . .

END OF BOOK III

London, September, 1940.

SPANISH INTERLUDE

I

No records exist of the arrival up the yellow Guadalquivir: of María Pía's emotions on first beholding the Torre del Oro, the delicate shaft of the Giralda winged about with the little fawn-coloured hawks which nest in the flying buttresses of the Cathedral: of the feelings of the whole party on setting foot for the first time on the mother-soil of Spain. Possibly none of them felt very romantic: the voyage had been a rough one, and the Marquesa never left her cabin. She was drained away, pale green and feeble as a plant grown in the dark, when they stepped out into the warm Sevillian sunlight. All four ladies—not to mention the female members of the entourage—were painfully aware of their travellers' disarray, shrouded their tangled curls with lace, and made as much speed as their weakened limbs would allow them to the waiting coaches, which took them to the palace of the Abades dukes, where the marqués had arranged for them to be accommodated, until they were sufficiently recovered to proceed on their journey to Madrid.

In a few hours María Pía had regained her abounding energy, and the thrill of her new surroundings had dispelled the nostalgic melancholy of the voyage. With Lucía still in bed, she insisted upon Madame Deschamps accompanying her on sight-seeing expeditions out and about the town. It was not correct, pending her aunt's recovery, for her to mingle in society, but the two ladies drew much attention—not all of it admiring—in their visits to churches and public monuments, their strolls in the flowery *paseos* that formed the outskirts of the town and ran down to the river banks.

"Why do people stare at us so, Deschamps? I believe we are not correctly dressed," confided María Pía.

"I suppose they see that we are foreigners."

"Foreigners? Aren't the creoles as Spanish as any of these?" She tossed her head. "No, it's our clothes and our hair; we are not in the fashion. It must be seen to, at once!"

She was unconscious of her towering height, which made women giggle and men observe: "*Qué gigante! Es un muchacho en faldas!*" She was, in any case, so deeply interested in all she found about her that such observations would not have disturbed her; she felt the delicate and quivering gaiety of the Sevillian air, responded with gay unconsciousness to the prevalent animation—so different from the heavy lethargy of Havana—and was charmed by the Sevillian courtesy, that showed in the shopkeepers' manners, in the graceful gestures of flower-selling gipsies, in the flourish with which a beggar received the *propina* she ordered their escort to bestow on him.

"No wonder Spain is the greatest country in the world, Deschamps! Its people are natural aristocrats. That man selling baskets—he might be a grandee!"

She accepted Sevilla without question as typical of the country as a

whole—an illusion sadly to be dispelled when they reached Madrid—and dragged Lucía out of bed to attend to the purchase and fitting of new gowns, which, owing to the French influence that, with the accession of Carlos IV, swept the peninsular, followed the Directoire fashions; a style unbecoming to Lucía's plumpness, but seen to its best advantage on María Pía's long, pliant limbs.

"Remember, *ma chère*," Madame Deschamps warned her, "that these people are much more cultivated, more sophisticated than the Cubans; there must be no criticisms!" And, for the love of heaven, she wanted to add, no references to your negro grandmother! But she need not have troubled; María Pía was no fool, her natural shrewdness and her sharp observation prompted her to a discretion with which even an exigent dueña could find no fault.

So they sparkled at the summer palace of the Alcazar, and created quite a sensation in the famous houses to which they were invited. Lucía, no less than her niece, was enchanted with the hospitalities they were shown, and, under the sweet caress of Sevillian compliment, began to forget she was the mother of four children: she was a tremendous success—more so than María Pía, who was admired, but was considered a little hard and cold by the ardent sevillanos.

When the marqués's peremptory summons came, to lose no further time in joining him in Madrid, both were reluctant, both depressed at the thought of leaving their eager hosts.

"Ay, you will not like Madrid!" they were assured, over and over again. "Not only is it a barbarous climate, but the madrileños are so dull, so formal! They talk of nothing but politics, and there are assassins at every corner!"

Lucía became so alarmed by such accounts that María Pía had to rally her into preparing for their departure.

"We can come back again if we do not like it! And it is a new place to see," she urged the marquesa, who batted her eyelids and thought it was perhaps better to leave before the attentions of a certain young grandee became too pressing. So on an autumn morning, when all the Andalusian plains were faded to lion-colour, and the cork-trees were dropping their russet foliage, they embarked on the long and tedious journey to Madrid; with an armed and mounted escort, for part of their way lay through the mountains which abounded in brigand hordes. They were to take it in easy stages, staying at various cities where the name of Montalba ensured them hospitality. The cavalcade consisted of three coaches, the first for Lucía, María Pía, the baby and its nurse; the second for Madame Deschamps and Doña Silvia, while in the third the female servants packed themselves, the men riding outside on the high, hooded seats at the back of the great, swinging travelling-coaches.

At first María Pía was wildly excited, seeing the journey in nothing but terms of adventure; but as the scent of the Andalusian roses faded, the echoes of the eternal guitars died away and the long, linked phrases of flamenco were swallowed in mountain silence: as the air thinned out and became frigid, towns and villages lost their soft, southern rosiness and became cold, forbidding fortresses, perched on the rock face, and voices shed their rich,

southern stridency for the lighter accents of the midland plateau, she felt her heart sinking.

At the top of a hill where they paused to rest the horses, María Pía and Madame Deschamps got out to take a little exercise. The bitterly cold air nipped their cheeks and made them wan; María Pía's lips were purple from the cold, and she thrust her chin deep into the fur collar of her mantle. Ahead of them stretched the long broken ribbon of the execrable road, and the grass was thin and bleached, the precipitous rock that towered above their heads seamed with gashes that were like the empurpled scars of old wounds. Trails of flying scud blew in white wisps against the crags that tore them to pieces: rejoined and floated on in thin, half-human shapes from which María Pía, after a quick glance, hastily averted her eyes, surreptitiously crossing herself beneath her cloak. Her lips pressed together, she leaned against the wind and drove herself forward as though, thought Madame Deschamps, who followed her, she sought to evade some intangible pursuit. Moving quickly, the Frenchwoman laid her hand on the girl's arm.

"Where are you going? You know it is not safe to get too far away from the others."

María Pía turned a strained look on her.

"It is as safe as anything," she answered enigmatically.

Dragging her cloak about her, Madame Deschamps faced her pupil.

"What is it? You look strange. You look ill."

"I'm tired with travelling."

Yes, indeed, so were they all. They had dragged themselves at last out of the Sierra Morena, across the dry valley of the Guadiana, with the waterless stony beds of its many tributaries; they had slept at Cordoba, Linares and Ciudad Real, and were now high in the Toledo mountains. Their bones ached with the jolting of the coaches, they had suffered several days of agonizing travel sickness, the changes of altitude had taken toll of their energies and affected Madame Deschamps' heart. She knew that, in spite of a scrupulous toilet, she looked every day of her age; it was not an encouraging reflection for a Frenchwoman. Yet she alone maintained the strict propriety of her appearance, and tried to persuade María Pía to do the same, while the Spanish ladies lapsed day by day into a more squalid dishevelment.

"Change places with me in the coaches; it will do us both good to have a change of company."

"I can't sit with Doña Silvia; she does nothing but whine and vomit."

"We have been very fortunate," observed Madame Deschamps, "to get so far on our way without disturbances."

María Pía gave her a strange, sidelong look.

"Why do you look like that?"

"I will tell you," María Pía said suddenly. "I feel that our fortune, as you call it, is over. I feel we are wrong to go to Madrid——"

"*Ma chère*, what else could we do? That is why we are come to Spain."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Sevilla: that was Spain."

"This is no less Spain, *ma chère*; what can be more Spanish than Toledo, the city of the Cid, the ancient capital of Castile?"

But for some reason she felt animosity in the girl's dark gaze and said no more. They walked rapidly back towards the coaches, and before re-joining her aunt, who was waving anxiously from the window, María Pía turned once more to Madame Deschamps.

"I am not fanciful, Deschamps; but we shall regret this journey," was her parting shot, as she lifted her skirts and, ignoring the servant who offered his arm, mounted the steps into the coach.

II

"The duque," purred Lucía, as she tried the effect of the new, fashionable loops of wired ribbon in her hair, "is so kind! He reposes such confidence in us!" She drew a quick breath of satisfaction; court favour, the erratic partiality of the Queen, her own standing about the court, filled the little marquesa de Montalba with a glow of pleasure, although she was disappointed to have been given no official status among Her Majesty's ladies. "Still, one understands." She pursed her lips with an air of wisdom. "One mustn't arouse jealousies. We have already been shown enough favours, it doesn't do to carry things too far."

María Pía and Madame Deschamps exchanged glances. Was it possible that Lucía's simplicity, the light sweetness of her nature, blinded her to the virulence with which she was regarded by the ladies of the entourage?

"I'll tell you a secret!"

Madame Deschamps's eyes flickered; why had Lucía's "secrets" invariably to be imparted when there were strangers in the room? Besides herself and María Pía, there were the two maidservants who always attended on the marquesa's toilette. The prudent Frenchwoman tried to create a diversion.

"You will need your heaviest furs to-day, if you are going out; the wind is like a knife."

"*Pues—?*" Lucía was vague. "Listen, my dears!" She reverted eagerly to her former subject. "The Altofrios' apartments are going to be empty in a week or two; perhaps we shall be able to move into them."

The Montalbas' lodging was almost within a stone's throw of the royal palace, in which the marqués had been offered apartments which he had chosen, for reasons of policy, to decline. Knowing that he could serve those whose interests he represented better from without than within the court, he had also been keenly alive to the jealousy which operated in court circles against the newly-arrived Cuban grandee and his family. Lucía, on her arrival, had expressed much disappointment that they were not to be housed in the palace, and had never ceased scheming and teasing her husband to procure royal apartments for them.

"The Altofrios? But what has happened?"

"Oh, she's quite out of favour," chuckled Lucía. "And he—they say he's been keeping the wrong sort of company lately. Of course, it's all to

be kept quiet for the present, but I can assure you we shall be moving into the palace before the winter is over——”

“What: all of us?” harshly interpolated María Pía.

“Now, *chica*——!” Lucía batted her lashes. The Montalbas had not risked presenting María Pía at court; at any moment one of their enemies might find out the secret of her heredity and use it against them; but the very discretion of their behaviour had roused a whirlwind of gossip, which, in time, reached the Queen’s ears and piqued her curiosity. Who was this handsome, towering, creole girl, and what was her position in the Montalba household? One rumour gave her to Montalba for his mistress: another linked her with Godoy, and since the duke’s infidelities to his royal mistress were notorious, María Luisa thought the matter was worth while looking into, sent for Lucía and questioned her closely.

The marquesa’s resistance to royal cross-examination was soon broken down; María Luisa, pleased with her new favourite’s confidence and discretion, signified her intention of calling on the Montalbas to view the girl about whom such a volume of rumour collected. Well coached by Madame Deschamps, María Pía made her reverence, and, coming out of it with credit, towered above the hard-faced little elderly Queen, with her raddled mouth that quivered incessantly over the bad teeth that caused her endless discomfort. So this was the mistress of Godoy!—the virtual ruler of unruly Spain. Discretion lowered the girl’s lids over eyes that were coolly contemptuous.

Her Majesty agreed that it was better not to invite criticism by having the girl about the court, but María Pía was free to walk with her dueña in the royal gardens: it being left to Madame Deschamps to avert any awkward encounters. María Pía expressed her humble gratitude with another deep reverence—but her pride was burning. She, a de Lorcha, descendant of creole nobility and African kings, to walk on sufferance in a palace garden! None of her aunt’s tearful entreaties, her protests that the Queen asked frequently how the señorita de Lorcha enjoyed her *paseo* could move her stubborn determination not to accept as a favour that to which, on her own merits, she was entitled.

“The Queen *commands* you to walk in the orangery this morning.” Lucía’s voice trembled with anxiety as she delivered the message.

“Does Her Majesty receive me there?” came the quick reply.

“*Pues, chica—tu sabes——!*”

María Pía turned her back.

“Don’t you understand? It is Her Majesty’s *command*,” insisted Lucía, her eyes bright with tears.

“I am Her Majesty’s most obedient servant,” snapped out María Pía, “but I am here to serve her in all reasonable ways, not to pander to her whims. What use am I to her, marching about under the orange trees?”

“You will ruin us all,” gasped the marquesa.

Touching her aunt’s cheek lightly with her lips, the girl said:

“No, I shan’t, Tía Lucía. But go your own way and let Deschamps and me go mine.”

“No, no,” Lucía was chattering hurriedly. “The Alfrofiros’ apartment was not a large one, and there will be room only for your uncle and me and

our own servants. We must keep on this place for our household: for you and the boys and little Epifanía—oh-oh-h!" she screamed. "My mouth—my mouth!"

"What is it, Tía Lucía?"

A broken pot of fard on the ground, the distracted muttering of the maids, no less than the tears streaming from the marquesa's agonized eyes, answered their questions. Madame Deschamps ran for one of those soothing balms of her own concoction that they had brought with them from Cuba, and a moment later was anointing poor Lucía's burning lips. María Pía had picked up the broken shards and was regarding them and their bright-coloured contents with an air of objective interest.

"From where?" Her raised brows questioned the servants.

"From the condesa de Altofrío, señorita!"

"I admired the lip-rouge Maravilla de Altofrío was wearing last night," whimpered Lucía, "and she promised to send me some. Oh, oh, it burns! My mouth feels as if it were burning away!"

"It will be better in a few minutes; don't touch your lips—the balm will cool them and prevent them blistering."

"What shocking carelessness!" moaned Lucía, as she groped for the linen towel to dry her tears.

"Carelessness!" burst out María Pía. "And it was carelessness, I suppose, when you found the needle stuck inside the finger of your glove? When you ate the quince paste that made you vomit for three-quarters of an hour? All these things were carelessness, and so was the time when Tío Miguel—"

The flash of Madame Deschamps's eye checked her. Lucía was sitting upright on the couch on which they had placed her, her hands pressed close down by her sides.

"What are you saying? Miguel——?"

"Do not distress yourself, madame," said Madame Deschamps quietly. "No doubt there are many heedless people who make mistakes——"

"Mistakes!" María Pía snorted. "No, I will say it, Deschamps. Tía Lucía is not a child, or she has no business to be! Can't you see how we are surrounded on all sides with hatred? The duke isn't Tío Miguel's friend; he only waits his opportunity to procure his dismissal. If he can't bring that about by influence, he'll use other means. . . . Tía Lucía, *won't* you understand? You think we're safe because we're under the Queen's protection; can't you realize that, in spite of her obstinacy, it's Godoy who wins in the end?"

"But—but your uncle is one of Godoy's most trusted confidants," stammered Lucía. "Hardly a day passes but he receives some mark of his favour——"

"Pah! Tía Lucía, I know you take no interest in politics, but you must often have listened to Tío Miguel talking with his friends at home; you know who's responsible for bringng us here——"

Before she could finish her sentence, bells rang, there was a crying along passages, and hurried footsteps brought the Queen's command: that the marquesa de Montalba should lose no time in presenting herself in Her Majesty's closet. Lucía's nervous, hasty spring was checked by her niece's hand on her arm.

"Take your time. It's nothing but an imposition!" indignantly exclaimed María Pía. "It's not even as if Tía Lucía were officially in-waiting! The Queen only sends for her to annoy her own women——"

"*I ais-toi!*" Madame Deschamps's delicate brows contracted, her glance flicked the messenger, who withdrew from the room. The marquesa's maids were hurriedly resetting the pins in her mantilla, while María Pía, shrugging her shoulders, went to the window to drag back the heavy, woven curtains and look out into the savage cheerlessness of the Madrid street, where the trampled snow was stained with animal dung, and the few passers-by went huddled to the eyes in their long, dark cloaks. An iron-coloured sky was clamped like an inverted bowl of metal on the roofs of the houses, and the wind that came screaming from the Castilian plateau drove like a knife-blade through the ill-fitting window frame.

A tap on the door ushered the younger of the two Montalba boys into the room; he wore the uniform of a Queen's page, and his young face had lost its glowing Cuban healthiness; the signs of a pathetic, premature debauchery were in the dark circles under his eyes and the nervous tic that twitched the corner of his mouth. He addressed his mother petulantly.

"Are you ready, Mama? The condesa's coach is waiting."

"Come here, Ramón." He turned towards his cousin, who beckoned from the window. "Has the condesa, by any chance, sent anything besides her coach?" inquired María Pía.

"Not to my knowledge. How should I know?" The boy shrugged insolently, gazing from beneath the fringe of his long lashes at the cousin he detested. "I am not the condesa's messenger."

"Then you may assume the office for once. You can take her these broken bits of pottery, and say that her present to the marquesa arrived in this condition; she had better find out who is responsible for it."

"Since Mama is going to the palace she can deliver her own messages," he pouted. "I am not on duty this afternoon."

"Indeed? And how are you celebrating your liberty?" Her strong hand reached out and fastened on his wrist. "You'd better take care of your looks, Ramón, since, apart from them you are just a nasty little boy, and sooner or later your friends will find it out!"

"Everybody knows you're green with jealousy," he muttered, as he wrenched his wrist away. Taken by surprise, María Pía allowed him to escape, and burst into ironic laughter.

As Lucía, half-smothered in her furs, touching with her handkerchief her still burning lips, hastened to obey the royal summons, she turned abruptly to her companion.

"*Dios mio*, when will it stop?"

"It will not stop the sooner for your indiscretions," pointedly returned Madame Deschamps, glancing at the door which Ramón, following his mother, had left unlatched. She crossed the room to close it before continuing. "*Ma mie*, I have told you a dozen times you must be more prudent; whatever is spoken here in front of the servants goes back to the palace." She paused. "Nor is it kind of you to alarm your aunt."

"*Dios mio*, she has got to be alarmed sooner or later. Deschamps, I am

not a fool; And neither, you can depend on it, is Godoy. Is Tío Miguel here to help France bleed Spain?"

"Hush, speak more quietly!"

"Deschamps, I hate Madrid! and I think if we stay here much longer I shall begin to hate Spain. It was different when we were in Sevilla; but here—I'm so desperately sick," said María Pía, kneeling suddenly and laying her head in her dueña's lap, "of darkness and cold; of wind that never stops blowing and snow that never stops falling. It's just like the madrileños: they're made of snow and wind—snow that freezes you into ice and wind that cuts you like a knife. I'm sick of whispering in galleries and spying through cracks in doors."

"*Ma chérie*, it is by your own choice we are here," relentlessly answered the Frenchwoman.

"*Pues*—by my own choice we shall leave!" She flung back her head and lifted her stubborn chin.

"And *ce monsieur*—Sax?"

The hardness and boldness of the look vanished; twisting her head aside, María Pía scrambled to her feet. Again she went to the window, to lean against the frosted glass, whose cold struck even through the padded sleeve of the gown she was wearing.

"And what could I have done but come here?" she muttered. "You do not suggest I should have stayed to share my mother's home with Leonor?" As Madame Deschamps was silent, she continued: "It is time we all left Madrid. No, you needn't shake your head. Even the leaders of his own party are against Tío Miguel and mistrust him for his favour at court. That affair at the Puerta del Sol is the fourth attempt that's been made on his life since our arrival, and God knows what happened before that."

"When the marqués accepted this mission he must have known he was going into danger."

"Into danger? Into a trap. What chance has the old reform party got against Godoy with Buonaparte behind him? It's all very well his not caring on his own account, but he's got no right to expose Tía Lucía to the malice of our enemies. She had that warning not to eat anything that might be offered her in the Queen's apartments, and look at this trick of the lip-salve. It's the second time the Altofrío woman has tried to do her an injury, and if the Altofríos are being turned out, as she says, they'll stick at nothing, and she's so foolish and innocent they're bound to succeed in time."

Madame Deschamps quietly picked up her embroidery frame and drew a few threads of silk through the canvas. She knew that she herself, as a Frenchwoman, was suspect with a certain faction which, outwardly servile, secretly resented the growth of French influence in Spain. She knew—or divined much more, and had gone as far as she dared without alarming the marquesa to warn her against placing too much confidence in María Luisa's favour, or in the good disposition of Godoy towards the Montalbas. Was the tool of the First Consul likely to entertain amicable feelings towards one of whom, without doubt, his spies had warned him? María Pía was not the only one to see the duke's hand behind the several recent attempts on Montalba's life, and if Montalba protested overmuch the excellent terms of

his relationship with Her Majesty's lover, Madame Deschamps suspected it was only to lull the fears of his wife.

"Do you expect Monsieur Sax this afternoon?" She coolly changed the subject.

"Why do you keep on about Monsieur Sax?" petulantly demanded María Pía.

Madame Deschamps laid down her work and looked her pupil in the eye.

"*Ma chère*, it is time you considered the subject of Monsieur Sax."

"*Madre mia!*—and why?"

"Come, you must not be childish," said Madame Deschamps briskly. "You have received many visits from *ce monsieur*, his sentiments are evident, and if, as he has given us to understand, his departure from Madrid is imminent, you must be prepared to deal with any situation that may arise."

María Pía sat suddenly on the window-seat, crossing her arms upon her bosom; the black brows lowered over her brooding eyes.

"You think, do you, that he's in love with me?"

"*Ma chère*, that is a question that you can surely answer better than I?" Her frown deepened.

"The English . . . one never knows. Their eyes tell you nothing—and I never saw colder eyes than his! Well, perhaps he is in love with me after his English fashion: at all events he's attentive enough. But I'll wager you anything you like he doesn't mean to ask me to marry him."

"*Comment?*" Madame Deschamps was startled. María Pía laughed shortly.

"For all your experience, how naïve you are!" she mocked. "Come, use your common sense. Who is this Beaufort Sax that we seem to be taking so seriously? He's the son of an English nobleman, heir to a title and a fortune and connected with more than half of the British aristocracy. So much gossip gives us. And, from our own observation, he's nearer forty than thirty, and he's not married—which argues prudence. He's extremely ambitious; that's in the narrow skull and jaw, and the forward-thrusting look like an arrow that goes straight to its mark. He's correct and conventional beyond all measure, and very haughty with inferiors. He frequents none but the highest society."

"Well?" interpolated Madame Deschamps as María Pía, her lip curling, paused to draw breath.

"Isn't it plain enough?" cried the girl harshly. "*Ce monsieur*, as you call him, is not going to marry a young woman who isn't received at court, and about whom all Madrid is buzzing with scandal!"

"That is not true, *ma chérie*."

"Of course it's true; and even if the Queen has held her tongue, than which nothing is less likely, I'm a mystery! No, my dear, dear Deschamps, Monsieur Beaufort Sax isn't going to propose marriage to me, but he would very much like to have me for his mistress."

"Don't be foolish! He must know such a thing is out of the question."

"It wouldn't be, would it, if I were in love with him?" said María Pía calmly. "Plenty of that sort of thing goes on here."

"You know as well as I do," said Madame Deschamps sharply, "that there must be no foolishness of that sort until after you are married. You

have had two proposals since we arrived in Spain, and if you wish to take a lover, I can only advise you to accept one of them as quickly as possible." Moved by one of her rare flashes of anger, her logic, for once, rose superior to the morality she had always striven to impose on María Pía.

"*Caramba!* I have no particular desire to take a lover. I find Beaufort Sax, if you want to know, just as exciting as a block of ice, and the only thing about him that interests me is his perseverance. You must admit that's downright funny! Each time an inch or half an inch farther forward then—halt! It's like being courted by a weasel. I never saw such caution in my life, but it's quite obvious he's certain of success."

"I think, at that rate, your aunt had better put an end to his visits," said Madame Deschamps quietly. María Pía's hand shot out and closed on her wrist.

"No! *Madre mia*, I've never given you credit for being so stupid!" She softened the accusation with a laugh. "*Ma chère*—don't you understand? It is so much to my interest to cultivate the friendship of Monsieur Sax for the sake of the advice and help he can give me in getting to England? If he's leaving soon, as he says, I must at least see to it that we part on good terms, so I may write to him later and claim his interest and perhaps his assistance for the journey. I've already got him to promise me he'll send me all particulars of the house in Bristol, which belongs to us since Mama died. His people have their summer place quite close to Bristol, and I think." added María Pía wisely, "if I remain friendly with him it will be a great help in getting into English society."

"*Mon enfant*, you talk as if we were going there next week!"

"And you behave," said María Pía cheerfully, "as if we were never going at all."

"You are very confident."

"Come," said María Pía, "let's find Doña Silvia and ask her to get her cards and give us a cut."

They found Doña Silvia huddled over her *brasero* in a long woollen pelisse lined with fur; she had very evidently been crying, and at first she refused to tell the ladies' cards.

"What's the matter with you?" robustly demanded María Pía.

"Have we all to wait here to be murdered?" All the sparkle and old-fashioned vivacity which had characterised Doña Silvia had vanished; her small face was netted with fine lines, her heavy hair had lost its Cuban gloss. Like the rest of the Montalba household, Doña Silvia was suffering acutely from the cold; she was miserably homesick for Havana and hated the icy formality of the Spanish capital.

"What's that you're reading?"

"It's a letter from Leonor." Leonor wrote frequently and voluminously to her ex-dueña, no doubt with the knowledge that such information as she chose to impart would be passed on. Her letters were invariably filled with the indulgence and generosity of her husband, the marvellous times she was having, and the authority her marriage had given her in Havana. She had cajoled Santiago into giving her a town house in which, under the guidance of Isabela, she entertained lavishly.

"When did the courier arrive?"

"While you were out." Doña Silvia seemed embarrassed; she thrust the letter into her pocket.

"Was there nothing for me?" María Pía's heart contracted; her father wrote seldom; his letters, when they came, were short and formal, the shadow of his name still lay on them, and Leonor's name was never mentioned: but, such as they were, she carried them in her bosom for weeks.

"No, no, nothing," said Doña Silvia hurriedly. "Were you asking for the cards?"

She rose from her chair to look for them, and, as she passed María Pía, the latter, catching hold of her gown, tweaked the letter out of her pocket. Doña Silvia squeaked a protest.

"You always show us the letters from Havana: what is the matter with this one?" María Pía unfolded the crumpled sheet and ran her scornful eye over Leonor's neat, elaborate writing.

"Don Pepe is very ill, and I expect we shall soon be moving into Buonaventura," she read aloud. "'We are giving a ball next week which, I expect, will be my last for some time as I shall be——'" María Pía's voice faltered then hardened to conclude the sentence—"having a baby in February.' I hope Tía Lucía will be gratified at the prospect of being a grandmother! Well, where are the cards?" she demanded.

The two ladies were silent and, wheeling round, she found them looking at her pitifully. The blood ran up her cheeks and burned in the roots of her hair, and doubling her fist she smote the mantelpiece by which she was standing.

"*Madre de Dios*, have I not asked for the cards?"

... As María Pía cut, and the first sheaf was spread out on the table, Doña Silvia gave a cry of dismay.

"A deep-water journey!"

"In what direction?"

"Towards the north. But first—but first—— No, no! I cannot." Leaning back in her chair Doña Silvia covered her face with her hands.

"Don't be a fool; control yourself!"

But María Pía's voice was unsteady as she bent over the cards. She knew enough of their language to read the message, and her heart quickened its beat, for treachery, disaster and violence lay thick as autumn leaves about the Queen of Clubs.

III

As he looked at the girl seated before him, Beaufort Sax knew that he had never so desired a woman with so unregulated a violence in all his life.

He had never exercised himself about women; he had kept several, for convenience, but never allowed them to feel they had the slightest claim on him. He used them coldly, as a matter of physical necessity, taking care that they had neither brains nor pride to resent his treatment.

His close resemblance to his father was a matter of externals only. He had Lord Edward's long-limbed elegance, his polished grace of manner: and there the likeness ended. "Beaufort will go far," was prophesied of

him when he was only a schoolboy. "He is as cold as ice and hard as steel; incapable of human affection, no sentiment will ever prevent his going straight to his goal." His brothers, Peregrine and William (Lionel was too young for opinions), had admired and a little feared him; he treated them with amused contempt, and maintained a curious formality in his dealings with them. "By thunder!" Peregrine had once ruefully remarked, "Beau might be no relation of ours, he's so fine and distant over all that concerns the family!"

At Oxford he had picked his companions carefully—not for their amicable virtues but for the service they might do him later on, and, apart from the university, his friends were chosen among men older than himself, with whom he soon gained a reputation for shrewdness and discretion beyond his years. He took pains so to perfect himself in foreign languages that his invitation to houses where foreign notabilities were to be entertained was almost to be taken for granted; and, by the exertion of his social graces, the sophisticated polish of his conversation and the gift, which he undoubtedly possessed, of making himself attractive to ladies, he drew upon himself the attention of certain ambassadorial powers, and, passing smoothly into the diplomatic service was already a personality before he was out of his twenties.

His appointment to Madrid had given him great pleasure; he liked the Spanish, liked their icy realism, enjoyed, as it were a game, pitting his own duplicity against theirs. Their long-winded formalities did not bore him; he was that way himself, preferred to surround the smallest occasions with elaborations of decorum. He admired their illimitable leisure, the utter negation of all suggestion of haste; he himself deprecated haste, for one could not hasten gracefully. And he admired in his bloodless fashion the Spanish ladies; never was breeding carried to so exquisite a degree of refinement as in the ladies of the Spanish court. The decadent, the elegantly dissolute made a powerful appeal to him. How, therefore, did it come about that he had lost his heart—or whatever deputized for that organ in his frozen interior—to María Pía de Lorcha?

His hand still burned from her touch, his stony grey eyes lingered on that patch of amber flesh that bore the imprint of his lips. She was more than ever glowing and desirable in her white gown, edged at hem and wrists with crimson; a crimson fishnet trimming was flung over the pearly folds, and her neck and bosom rose triumphant from the sable tippet that lay across her shoulders. The black mantilla was pinned to her hair with a great *chou* of stiffened ribbon which increased her height; Beaufort, a tall man, found that her eyes were on a level with his own. The girl was a Diana.

He was almost frightened to discover himself capable of so powerful an emotion. He had always distrusted emotion, had recognized its weakening influence, and believed himself to have eliminated it from his system. But this girl was in his blood, her fire infected him; not, however, to the point of betraying himself.

For, of course, it was madness. How could he, Beaufort Sax, with a hundred ambitions burning him up, contemplate marriage with a girl whose background was so uncertain as the señorita de Lorcha's? A young woman with a secret was no wife for a successful diplomatist; Cæsar's wife must be above suspicion. Yet she had none of the manner of the young woman on

whom is laid the shadow of a social blight. Her towering insolence, the cold assurance of her behaviour belonged to the aristocracy; they set Beaufort's curiosity aflame.

The marquesa de Montalba, freed for the nonce from attendance on her royal patroness, was holding one of her evening receptions and the ornate apartments were crowded with a glittering company. Beaufort surveyed with a sapient eye the grandees and their wives who found it politic, for the present, to accept the hospitality of Their Majesties's favourites. He commanded many channels of information, and it had been represented to him that Madrid was not a healthy abode for his friends the Montalbas.

The great, cold rooms were warmed by the heat of bodies and filled with the stench of candles, of men's pomades and women's perfumes; resonant masculine voices rose from time to time like trumpet blasts above the soft, lisping sibilants of the women whose rustling taffetas contributed another layer to the sound which went in waves from wall to wall. Beaufort, who had cultivated his sensibilities, felt uneasiness in the air; beneath the concerto of conventional gaiety moved another mood that expressed itself in quick, sidelong glances in a gesture here and there, in the sudden collecting and dissolving of a group, in a whisper that broke too suddenly into artificial laughter.

Lucía's little face was brilliant with a rather foolish excitement and pleasure; she was the centre of a group of ladies who flattered her, praised her dress, her style of hairdressing, her youthfulness. "Who ever would think you were the mother of two great boys?" "*Caramba*, I'll soon be a grandmother as well! What a pity you can't see my daughter—she is quite lovely, and she is married to quite the most important man in Cuba," glowed Lucía, who, at moments like these, was always inclined to forget her resentment of Leonor. At some moment the infant Epifanía was brought in and carried through the rooms on a satin cushion: the baby's looks, its magnificent robe of lace, were equally praised. Lucía was almost inarticulate with pride and delight. . . .

"So, señor, you are not yet leaving us?"

He found himself—by his own intent or hers?—alone with María Pía in a little closet that linked the *salas* with the marquesa's tiring room, to which she had been to have a falling curl repinned. He had marked her retreat and taken advantage of the diversion caused by the baby's progress to follow and intercept her return. It was, he thought, what she had intended, by the casual look she threw him, in passing, across her shoulder.

"As you see, señorita, I linger"—he bowed elaborately; recovering, his pale, cynical face was on a level with hers. María Pía's lips curled into a faint, conscious smile. He was transparent to her—a fact which would have annoyed Beaufort if he had suspected it.

"I must have misunderstood you, señor; you haven't then got affairs in England that call you urgently?" As he made no reply, keeping his eyes on hers with a fixity of gaze that might have abashed one less certain of herself, she added, "Or perhaps there are attractions here, in Madrid, whose claim is stronger, even, than that of duty?"

Her direct attack took him off his guard; he smothered an exclamation as he bent forward again to snatch her hand and press it to his lips.

"What attraction could there be," he muttered, "other than this?"

Her hand stiffened at the dry touch of his mouth; she should, she knew, have been insulted by the attentions of this man who, while allowing her to see his passion lacked courage to go further; she was fascinated, like the doe under the circling of the eagle; yet there was little doe-like in María Pía de Lorcha. The least sign on her part, and she would be in his arms; she was frank enough, in her heart, to admit that the prospect allured her. Her flesh was not stirred by this cold, discriminating Englishman, but through his wooing she tasted power, and power at this moment was more than love to María Pía.

"You puzzle me, señor," she told him with affected indifference.

"Has no man made love to you before?" His tone marked his incredulity.

"So this is love?" she reflected aloud.

"What else should have kept me in Madrid now that my work is over?"

"You flatter me." She dropped an ironic curtsy. "But I'm afraid, señor, you have had little reward for your patience."

A greyness appeared round his tightening lips and, keenly observant, she saw his fingers twitch upon the hilt of his sword.

"I have no illusions about the reward."

Her brows arched in surprise.

"Does that mean that you ask for none?" she rallied him.

"To ask discounts the value of that which is bestowed," he told her, and reflected her irony with his bow. She caught her breath a little. Not a few men had made love to her, but not in this hunter's fashion, this cautious, sly approach that left no doubt of its objective. So he was so sure of succeeding that he would not even beg? Her pride reared, she spoke coolly.

"I must return to our guests, señor; do you give me your arm?"

"I have hopes that you will claim my escort—further," he replied, and paused, blocking her path.

"Further——"

He had made sudden decision and spoke boldly.

"When I leave Madrid, I do not go alone."

"Indeed?" she parried. "And who goes with you?"

"Make what plans you choose," he said, "but let them be made soon. You say it is your intention later to visit England; take my advice—let it be sooner, not later. Later may be—difficult; and at no time is it safe for ladies to travel without an escort between here and the coast of Spain."

"*Caramba!*" Her white teeth flashed. "I'm vastly obliged to you for your consideration."

"Let us not trifle." His voice had lost its coolness; he spoke with a measured severity which, against her will, impressed María Pía. "I have already hinted at reasons why Madrid is not a favourable place for you to linger in."

"I don't pay attention to hints, señor!—nor do I need them to inform me of what my common sense has told me already." She paused. "I know my uncle has many enemies, but how should they affect me? I am a person—of no importance!" The lift of her head gave the lie to her words.

"It would not be agreeable or convenient for you to be here if certain schemes which, I am given to understand, are afoot were to succeed."

"Nor, I imagine, would it be agreeable or convenient for my Aunt. I have others beside myself to consider; there's my Aunt, there's my dueña, and there's my little cousin Epitánia. I stay in Madrid, señor, until I can persuade them to accompany me. We talked to-day of paying another visit to Sevilla; that will be very pleasant, and I think Tía Lucía is willing to consider it while her apartments in the palace are being put in order."

He saw she was adamant and that he would gain nothing for the present by attempts to alarm her. This girl was not to be alarmed! His reluctant admiration flowed towards her, as he offered her his arm.

IV

The marqués de Montalba took formal farewell of his companions who agreed it would be imprudent if he were not to put in appearance at his wife's reception. In their dark eyes he read recognition of the unspoken truth that lay in each man's heart: that their little party, so secret, so dangerous, represented a forlorn hope: that the throne of Spain was not to be saved, even by the death of Spain's worst enemy.

For many months now this small, secret company of loyalists had debated the assassination of Godoy as a means, first, of averting revolution and, second, as a check on the advance of Napoleonic power throughout the Peninsular. Yet who was there to put in Godoy's place? There was Fernando, the heir-apparent, endowed by a credulous public with all those qualities his father lacked; he might, thanks to his popularity, serve for a figure-head, but he was as little capable as Carlos of ruling the vast, turbulent and rebellious provinces of Spain. At the first hint of danger to his own skin he was liable to run squealing to the First Consul—at present well content with the monthly subsidy of six million francs he had wrung with no great difficulty from his vassal. Godoy's death, they were forced to recognize, would lead nowhere in particular, since it left a moron on the throne and the balance of power in the small, grasping fingers of María Luisa, pawn of Napoleon through her devotion to the House of Parma. It was she who had forced her puppet husband into the disgraceful secret treaty of San Ildefonso which ceded Louisiana and pledged Spain to the support of France in all her wars. It was she who had sent Godoy off to invade Portugal, thereby enriching the French coffers by a sum of twenty-five million francs, and it was evident that she was wholly in sympathy with the First Consul's intention to bleed Spain further in his prosecution of territorial claims.

No wonder the supporters of reform shuddered, with the fruits of twenty-nine years of enlightened despotism shrivelling under their noses and a half-imbecile king taking his orders from his wife's lover, whose voice was the voice of Buonaparte. No wonder they had ranged far and wide in their search for a power to combat that of the duque de Alcudía, an arriviste title used only in irony when they spoke of the Queen's favourite. Little or no suspicion attached to the arrival of a Cuban nobleman, with hereditary title to royal office, and two young sons for whom he naturally desired the advantages of a madrileño education. Even Godoy, at the beginning, was taken in; he had no apprehension of loss of his royal mistress's favour. However much

she might be captured by the fresh charms of her new courtier, she would not risk offending the First Consul, who had restored her lover to office after a brief eclipse whose main reason was his flagrant infidelities.

Delicate and dangerous as was his situation, the *marqués* had succeeded not only in consolidating his court position, under the very nose of Godoy, but in satisfying his own party. He knew he was spied on from both sides—an uneasy position: now and again suspicion flared up from one side or the other, and he knew himself in mortal peril, but this was stimulant to Montalba. Less than a month after his arrival, while Lucía was still in Cuba, he had become *lié* with an ex-mistress of Godoy; the liaison continued and proved profitable to the party, but he had been conscious for some time that they were getting no further.

The personal animosity his court advancement had brought him counted little with Montalba, but he was aware that Godoy's watchfulness was increasing; that under a mask of apparent friendliness and confidence the duke was waiting only to strike a blow that might terminate any further possible activities on behalf of the party. Such a blow must be anticipated: how? It was the matter they had met to discuss on the night of Lucia's reception—a meeting which, in itself, was difficult enough, for the eyes of Godoy were everywhere, and the party members took care not to recognize each other in public. It took place in an old house in the calle de León, whose main advantage was that it had numerous entrances, so that the members need not all be seen going in by the same door. Men walking in that district carried their swords loose and ready; the place bore an ill repute and was avoided by decent citizens.

"The Queen asked me to-day how I should like to be appointed to Lisbon," Montalba told them soon after his arrival.

A quick hiss of indrawn breath, a lightning glance, ran round the table; they could have received no clearer intimation of Godoy's suspicions.

"Your answer?"

The *marqués* shrugged his shoulders.

"What would you? It was no moment for protestations. I indicated that my wife was hardly yet in a fit state of health to take another long journey."

"What about moving into the *Altofríos*'s apartments?"

"The preparations go forward. Her Majesty does us the honour to consult with my wife about the disposal of the rooms." There were signs, he went on to say, that the unanimity between the Queen and her lover was less marked than usual. If Godoy wanted to get rid of them, the Queen, for her own reasons, wanted them to stay: so much seemed obvious.

The room smelt of tallow, old clothes and dust; the one window, whose shutter was broken, was obscured by a collection of rags, and the one candle which lighted them was thrust into a bent candlestick thick with verdigris; a strange venue for seven ceremonious Spanish gentlemen. The man next to Montalba was drenched with perfume to cover the fact that he had been eating garlic; the scent and the garlic strove against each other and nearly suffocated Montalba.

The old, white-headed Cabañal de Bétera, who sat opposite, broke out suddenly.

"Are we dreamers? We meet together, as we have been meeting for

months, and one man talks of furnishing an apartment and another has been favoured with an orange from Her Majesty's fingers!" This jibe brought a laugh at Martorell's expense; he, the desiccated dandy, was wont to boast of his successes with women, among whom he claimed the elderly, lustful queen; he was ironically christened "*El Emulo*" by his fellow-conspirators. But old Cabañal quelled the laughter by bringing his thin, clawed hand down with a rattle of fossilized nails on the table. "It is no time for laughing, señores! That God may pardon us—we have laughed too long. It is the time for action."

"*Hombre*," mildly observed the man who stank of garlic, "how would you have us act? We have discussed everything; we have come to the conclusion that this and that and such a thing are useless. What now? It seems to me we have come to the end."

"There is no end," spat Cabañal between his shrivelled lips, "until Spain is purged of her enemies."

"You are an idealist," contemptuously returned the other.

Montalba looked up sharply.

"To do what we are doing, señor, requires idealism. If you do not agree with me, you are better not of our company."

The garlic eater lowered his lids and looked at Montalba from the corner of a rheumy eye.

"*Obras son amores, que no buenas razones*." Deeds are love, and not fine phrases. Montalba's face burned, his hand went to his sword. He had long suspected that this was his enemy.

"*Bueno*." He turned to face the company. "You shall have deeds, gentlemen, since you are not satisfied with reasons."

"Quietly, my friend." It was Martorell who spoke; for all his coxcombry his was the superior brain in all the party. "Let us not sacrifice such ground as we have already gained to a disagreement among ourselves."

But old Cabañal, who had been drinking, had reached the bounds of his patience. He clambered to his feet, gesticulating and making incoherent noises; his thin, aristocratic face of a Castilian nobleman was flushed to a leaden hue, and his clawlike hands shook in the air. All began to shout, to protest.

"Kill Godoy!" These alone were the words that emerged from the general clamour.

Martorell, the only one who had kept quiet amid the uproar, smiled thinly and took snuff. The triviality of the action seemed to rivet the others' attention: silence fell.

"Kill Godoy by all means," said Martorell very quietly, "but first—kill the Queen."

The silence became like velvet; you could have dented it with your finger. A long drip of wax ran down the candle and the draught twisted it about the brass socket; the seven men watched it silently; it seemed like a sign. Then Cabañal grunted and fell back in his chair. It was enough. At last he had goaded someone to make a statement.

... Montalba's neighbour was slowly tearing slips of paper.

"We will draw twice; the first time for Godoy, the second——"

"Hush!" said somebody nervously.

Montalba watched the slips spread fanwise in the other's yellow fingers and knew, with the certainty which surpasses logic, that one of the marked slips would fall to his share, and that, whichever he drew, it would mean death: for whoever took the life of the closely-guarded Queen or her equally closely-guarded lover must be prepared to sacrifice his own. There was no chance of ambush; the deed must be done quickly out in the daylight: perhaps in the presence of a dozen people.

He heard himself give a deep sigh, for life was good and heroism is not so gratifying when one is not alive to enjoy it. A series of little pictures flashed through his mind with startling clarity: his estate near Havana, the fine ancestral rooms of his palace, the richness of the Cuban scene, of blue water seen through blossoming branches, the sports in which he delighted, the heat of his horse's barrel clipped between his knees, the bull galloping towards him across the ring, the faces of his Cuban friends, his growing sons. . . . Then he deliberately thought of other things: his wife's reception—and if he was going to do this thing he had better find a priest and confess; there might not be time afterwards.

He found himself looking down at a strip of paper which had appeared between his fingers; he turned it over—and smiled when he saw the little cross.

"*Pues, señores*, I had better be going." He rose casually. "There is company at my house to-night."

He made his farewells, each man shaking hands with him after his own fashion: old Cabañal's grip was hard as iron, Martorell's touch was delicate, fastidious, as though his flesh shrank from contact with Montalba's palm; the garlic-eater's was moist and sweaty—Montalba surreptitiously wiped his hand down the seam of his breeches before offering it to the next man. They looked at him with their dark, blank eyes, as though each questioned in his heart if even this could save Spain: yet it must be done.

"You will take your own time?" questioned the man who had drawn the second slip. He was very tall, with a young-old face of a monk; in his face was a limitless disillusionment; one could tell that he made his sacrifice with no hopes of its efficacy.

"*Seguro*," said Montalba, "I shall have many things to arrange first: but I will tell you when I am ready."

There was a general murmur of "Go with God." God went with him down a crumbling stair, guided his hand along a sweating wall. On the inner side of a creaking door he paused to listen to the sough of the wind as it whined round the corner of the streets of León and Lope de Vega. There was no other sound, no footfall on the cobbles, no rustle as he opened the door and stood for a moment, blinded by the blackness of the night.

And here God deserted the marqués de Montalba: for, as he stepped noiselessly across the threshold, a dagger drove deep between his shoulder-blades, and the stones of León ran red with the noblest of Cuban blood.

V

"Your uncle is so late! People are already going!" Lucía's little face, pink with mortification, appeared near María Pía's shoulder.

"Who are going?" María Pía looked carelessly about the yet crowded room. "If a few people go, Tía Lucía, we shall at least have room to breathe!"

"Your uncle should not have left me to receive all these people alone! Supposing the Queen arrives before he is here?"

"The Queen is coming here—to-night?" María Pía was startled.

Lucía's eyes flashed, she laid her finger to her lips.

"Hush! I have told nobody. It was Her Majesty's pleasure to arrive informally, to make a sensation!"

Looking about her, María Pía could well imagine what a sensation the Royal entrance would cause. And how astonishing of Lucía to have kept her secret! The explanation of her aunt's feverish excitement throughout the evening was now clear.

"Did not Tío Miguel know?"

"I have had no opportunity to tell him; she only made up her mind when I was leaving her, just in time to dress. *Dios mío*, and he knew I was entertaining; what a scandal that he does not come home! I suppose he is with that woman as usual," muttered Lucía, her eyes glittering with resentful tears. Aware of listening ears, of sharp, malicious eyes, María Pía took her aunt's arm and led her aside.

"Wouldn't it be wise to send a message in case something should happen to detain him?" she suggested. "The house is close at hand in the calle de los Heros."

"*Santísima Virgen!*" gasped Lucía. "The Queen is arriving!"

There was a great commotion in the street which drew all the guests to the windows; the façades of the opposite houses turned red with the lights of flambeaux, and men and women cried aloud their recognition of the royal coach. Lucía was nearly swooning with excitement and anxiety; the Queen was showing her a signal favour, whose reports would resound tomorrow throughout Madrid; her triumph was in the jealous faces of women, turned suddenly towards her; she forced her pale, dry lips into a smile and, almost tottering, took an arm—she knew not whose—to support her to the head of the stairs. Beaufort Sax, whose arm it was, felt her trembling and reflected that the marquesa de Montalba had not much breeding; at the same time he was gratified to be present on such an occasion.

The great, wrought-iron *cancelas* that guarded the vestibule were flung open and, from the stairhead, towards which, now, the guests were crowding, they could see the surge of figures in the torchlight, hear the peremptory shouting of the guard and the frightened, plunging of horses' hoofs on the cobbles.

"Oh, oh!" panted Lucía, beside herself. "Why don't they clear the way? How can Her Majesty get in?"

Seconds went by in uproar; it became obvious that there was some blockade in the street. Lucía was nearly swooning with mortification while

the guests tittered in the background; this indeed was a nice way to receive the Queen of Spain! This Montalba—this little barbarian from Cuba—she must have known that Her Majesty was arriving—sly puss!—and had made, nevertheless, no provision for the royal reception. Serve her right; María Luisa, who made much of ceremony, and more when she herself chose to disregard it, would not take this easily; with luck, the Montalba would receive a public snub.

The shouts had become angry, there was the sharp crack, like a pistol shot, of a coachman's whip, followed by the agonized scream of some unfortunate trampled under a horse's hoofs or caught by a wheel, and through the *melée* which had developed in the street, the Queen's coach rattled past, its blinds closely drawn, the mounted guard with drawn swords beating back the rabble who in their terror were driven in through the *cancela*.

What a spectacle for Lucia's guests, who leaned upon the balustrades as at a play, looking down on the rag-tag and bobtail of Madrid that herded upon her escutcheoned marble floors! Beaufort Sax, constrained by politeness to continue supporting his swooning hostess, and conscious of the laughter of the Castilian nobility, cursed the conspicuousness of his situation. The faded faces looking down, the haggard, emaciated masks that looked up, formed a double nightmare; he wondered what they meant, those damned ones, stretching their skinny arms up, shrieking something that was drowned in the mirth of their superiors.

Ramón de Montalba and some of his young friends went bounding down the stairs, their swords in their hands, to help clear the vestibule: but as the wretched, ragged throng was driven to the threshold it was driven in again by fresh arrivals whose compulsion was in their lifted hands, their faces of horror. They were carrying something in—something whose lifelessness was in its trailing hands, its sagging joints; something they laid on the black-and-white marble. . . .

He found María Pía at his side.

"What is it?" she was saying, while Ramón, with a scream, flung himself upon the bloody corpse of his father.

Book IV
BRISTOL

CHAPTER I

I

"WHAT with the Army and the Navy, and now this absurd notion of Lionel's, I might just as well have no children at all!"

"You must blame your own oversight, Orry, in neglecting to provide yourself with a daughter!"

"Thank you, I don't *want* a daughter." Lady Edward tossed her head, remembered a freshly arranged coiffure, and placed an anxious hand to her curls. "The only consolation I have in the midst of all my troubles is that I haven't got a girl to be fretting about. Boys are difficult enough, God knows, and with Beau gadding about Spain, and Will's regiment ordered to France—which I suppose it may be at any minute—I declare I'm nearly driven out of my mind."

The woman sitting opposite rested her cheek on a thin, jewelled hand, and looked kindly, with an expression of tenderness and wisdom, at the perturbed speaker.

"You can hardly expect a soldier to stay at home in such times as these, my dear."

"Upon my soul, Pally, there was a time I thought you were a fool, and I could have smacked you over the affair of Matthew Flood; but I have come to the conclusion you were the wise one, after all. Marriage," sniffed Orabella, "is a very much overrated institution."

Pallas laughed outright. It was the same heart-warming laughter as of old, though the "sweet bells" were a little jangled.

"Will you never grow up, Orry?"

"Now, that's a ridiculous thing to say to a woman in her sixties! Not that I look my age, of course," added Orabella hastily. "We both 'wear well,' don't we? I suppose we inherit that from Mama. In my case it was to be expected, but in yours——"

"Perhaps, in our venerable age, I may be permitted to remind you that I was supposed to be the better-looking of the two!"

"And still are," pouted Orabella. "Well, I don't care if I do eat too much; I've still got my complexion, and eating's one of the few pleasures that are left at our time of life." She looked down at the pouter thrust of her breasts, remembering regretfully that at this age Lydia had left off her stays for good; alas, what was permissible for a Bristol merchant's lady was not allowed to Lady Edward Sax. It was almost annoying to have Pallas opposite, slim and half reclining in her half-dress of black plume velvet, with a plaid gauze about her shoulders and a broad black velvet ribbon supporting the muslin frill that brushed the almost unbroken perfection of the line of chin. Poker-backed in public, Miss Burmester would occasionally allow herself to relax in the privacy of her sister's boudoir; but the fine silver head still carried itself as though it bore the powder which public opinion and latterly the law had eliminated from fashionable use. How handsome Pally was—and how elegant! Lady Edward spoke fretfully.

"Why aren't you wizened, and fussy, and eccentric? Why don't you keep a parrot and embroider bands for the curate?"

"Because I've got better things to do, you silly child!" The word slipped out involuntarily; it was true that Lady Edward, "in her sixties," was still a child.

"People who go in for charities are usually such bores; they wear shocking clothes, and think it's wrong to spend a penny on themselves——"

"You know what I think about that. It's to everybody's advantage I should make a good appearance, since"—a twinkle appeared in Pallas's blue eye—"I've got no title to lend me prestige!"

"A lot of need you have of titles! Besides, you could have had one if you'd chosen. It's not so long since Lord Welbeck proposed to you."

"Talk about ancient history!—it's a good twenty years ago."

"Pallas." A touch of the old diffidence from younger to elder sister crept into Orabella's voice. "There's something I always wanted to ask you."

"Ask away."

"Have you stayed a spinster because you loved no other man, or—or out of sheer stubbornness?"

There was an appreciable pause before the answer came.

"I grant you stubbornness is one of my most grievous faults. There are, however, people who have been grateful for it." Again she paused. "No, my dear; it wasn't stubbornness all the time!"

"Do you mean you *still* love him?"

"Do you still love Edward?"

"You know that's quite another matter!"

"Is it? Oh, I know what you mean," went on Pallas, as Orabella threw out her hands with a movement of exasperation. "Because Matthew and I were never wed, never enjoyed each other, it seems to you—and, doubtless, to many other people—odd that I should be faithful to him. Is that, then, the meaning of fidelity? Is fidelity only confined to those whose flesh has been joined together?"

Although it was an age of plain speaking, Lady Edward coloured under her thin mask of paint.

"You know I didn't mean that. The thing I find odd, and other people as well, is that you should insist on fidelity to a person who's treated you so scandalous. To take a black woman to wife——!"

"What has that to do with me?" asked Pallas calmly.

"For a woman of sensibility, I find you strangely insensitive at times," was the tart rejoinder.

The fine, crêpe-like lids lowered themselves quickly over eyes into which came a flash of warning. She controlled herself to answer:

"Be reasonable, Orry. Nothing that has happened since Matthew and I separated is any concern of mine. Nothing affects the time when we were happy together. In any case, it is all such ancient history that I am surprised that you, or any one else, should trouble themselves about it."

"Do you trouble yourself about it?" astutely inquired her sister.

"Of course not. It is like a story that I read once, long ago."

"Very pretty. It's a pity your conduct gives the lie to your words." Lady

Edward flounced herself into an easier position in her chair. Again the twinkle appeared in Miss Burmester's eyes.

"You're not going to bully me about not getting married at my age!"

"Don't be evasive!" Orabella stamped her foot.

"I'm not being evasive. But this seems a very foolish sort of conversation between two old women. If you imagine," said Pallas slowly, "that I've lived all these years with none of the emotions proper to a healthy woman, you're wrong. I've not got the temperament of a spinster; I'd have made a good mother, and, I think, a good wife. Like yourself, I prefer the company of men to that of women. But I've outlived my fevers, Orry, and I can't say it gives me any particular pleasure to look back on them."

"You can't put me off like that. Do you know, this is the very first time we've ever talked openly about these things?"

"Oh-ho, you've got a short memory!"

"Oh, well, not for years and years. And not properly, even then; because you always overawed me. You used to look so forbidding if one tried to talk to you——"

"Nay, I won't believe that. It was you who were always so awkward and self-conscious when any one happened to mention Matthew's name; I'd have talked of him freely, if I hadn't come to the conclusion it was unkind to embarrass you."

"Well, it *was* embarrassing," asserted Orabella, "with everybody all agog over the lawsuit, and even London society talking of nothing but Catholic plots and that shocking marriage——"

"I'm sorry to have involved you in so much unpleasantness, Orry," said Pallas. She moved a little impatiently, as though she had had enough of the subject, but, once started, Orabella was not to be diverted.

"How you could go on caring about so disgraceful a creature——"

"Don't forget I had my share of responsibility. He felt—as I suppose any man would have felt—that I'd failed him. Perhaps I did; but I couldn't have altered my attitude to the slave trade, and what could I have done for the Society, with my husband a trader?"

"If I'd cared as much as all that, I'd have let the Society go hang!"

"I don't doubt you would. And you wouldn't have felt that every hour of pleasure which you enjoyed was snatched from the poor creatures you were pledged to help. As it was, I had at least the consolation—and I don't mind admitting it wasn't worth much at the time—of knowing that my action made a considerable impression on the few people who knew of it."

"Few! You were the talk of Bristol."

"Bristol—a pinspot. But even in Bristol we had quite a little rush of new members, and some handsome subscriptions from people who'd refused us before." She laughed quietly. "How queer people are. They'd been listening for years to speakers like Jason Flood; they'd given, grudgingly, a few pence here, a shilling there, to Amelia and Michal, who, poor girls, out of their meagre pittances, often had to make up the deficit on our yearly accounts. And because a girl breaks off her betrothal, they're moved as all our speakers have failed to move them——!"

"Yes, and years after that, the Reverend Clarkson even spoke about you in one of his sermons."

"Fine and angry I was about it. Perhaps I shouldn't have been. One shouldn't mind the sacrifice of one's private life to the public good."

"Oh, well," Orabella sighed. "You're very matter of fact about it now. But it was a different story a few years ago."

"My dear," said Pallas, "there are sentiments which are unbecoming to old age. I hope I have sufficient sense of what is appropriate to my years, not to cling to that which, very properly, is past and, by most people, forgotten."

"I suppose that is intended for a snub! Oh dear, I wish I had plucked up courage to talk to you about this before."

"Why? I think it happens, now and again, that two people meet, who are so completely each other's counterpart that nothing can come of it but disaster if they don't follow out their appointed track. I think such people are destined to be mates, and that any other ties they may make are doomed. Hasn't it proved so—in this case? I might, as you say, have married; once or twice I even thought seriously of doing so."

"Walter Fripp!" cried Orabella triumphantly. "I'm sure it was—was it?"

"Never mind. I——"

"I *won't* have you so abominably secretive! Pally, were you in love with Walter Fripp?" she persisted. "Everybody knows he was crazy about you."

"'In love'!" mocked Pallas. "When Walter Fripp proposed to me I was in my thirties. I refused his proposal, because nobody has the right to carry ill fortune into another person's life."

"Pish! With a good husband and a litter of children you'd have forgotten such fancies. La, Pally, I'm glad you didn't marry Fripp! To think of you squandering yourself on a provincial clown like that——!"

"He's a very honest, good man—though he and I are always squabbling. No, no; I know my faults. I'm very determined and obstinate about getting my own way—no less so, I fear, than on the day when I sacrificed everything that made up my happiness, and Matthew's, nearly forty years ago."

"Didn't you ever regret it?"

"My dear, what do you suppose? I'm not a superwoman, Orry; and it cost me months and years of bitter regret, even though I knew I was right at the time——"

The door opened, and Lord Edward and his youngest son, Lionel, came into the room. Pallas turned to her nephew with an expression of relief.

"Well, who won?"

"Oh, I'll never beat Father at billiards!" Lionel laughed, as he went to kiss his mother's hand.

"Put on some more wood, Edward; I'm cold." Orabella shivered under the shawl she had drawn across her shoulders.

"Go to bed, my dear; do you know it's after one o'clock?"

"One o'clock! What does that mean to us in London? Yet here it seems like the end of the world. Oh, Edward—I sometimes wish the world would come to an end! Another century—as if humanity hadn't gone through enough already. Looking back, I seem to remember nothing but wars. This horrible man Buonaparte; I sometimes think he's the devil."

"Wait until William's got at him, Mama!" Lionel was laughing at her, and, for once, Orabella was not in a mood to be laughed at.

"Hold your tongue, sir! It may be a joke to you, that one of your brothers is already sacrificed to this horror of war——!"

A spasm crossed Lord Edward's face; he went to a bookshelf and chose a volume; an uneasy silence fell on the little company, broken by a sobbing breath from Orabella.

"And you——!" Again she swung on her son. "With your nonsensical notions about becoming a painter——!"

"It's not so *very* nonsensical, Mama!"

His mother bridled.

"No painters are gentlemen!"

"That doesn't seem a reason why a gentleman should not be a painter." Lord Edward smiled at his son, who looked gratefully back at him. A little bent by the years, the master of Paragon moved still with his greyhound-like grace, that his youngest boy had inherited, but it was the old greyhound now, full of the dignity of an honourable life. Orabella's quick, passionate glance went from one to the other: Edward, her husband, and Lionel, her precious, her puzzle, her pride. He was smiling at her, his handsome young face, the image of his Burmester grandfather's, alight with love and understanding, as it always was when he looked at her. It often puzzled her that Lionel should seem to understand her so well, when she sometimes felt that she did not understand him at all. She found herself thinking: "Whoever you marry—I shall hate her!" She was prepared, she told herself, to fight to the last ditch, to keep her only remaining son.

For all her other children, in the way of human flesh, had flown the nest, and there were days when Orabella, like Pallas, felt herself existing in a world of ghosts.

There were the ghosts of Ralph and Lydia; of Peregrine—lost at Aboukir; of William—living, but so taken up with his career in the fashionable 10th Light Dragoons that he was as good as dead to his family; married as well—Caroline, sharp, patronizing, a climber in society, was no favourite with her mother-in-law, who jeered openly at Mrs. William's boasted friendship with Lady Jersey. "If she thinks to secure William's advancement by those means," commented Orabella acidly, "even I can inform her she's barking up the wrong tree! Everybody knows about the snub her precious Primate handed the Jersey cow in the Chiswick paddock!" Orabella was extremely well informed in social matters; it was her chief diversion since the children grew up.

Beaufort, the second son, restless and handsome, had got himself attached to the embassy at Madrid, and wrote home letters of such impeccable discretion that, as Orabella remarked, they might as well read the newspapers, which told one something, even if it were a farrago of lies. And now there was no one at home except Lionel, and Peregrine's gentle widow, whose children romped in the nurseries—and Orabella made no bones about not relishing the rôle of grandmama.

How different it had been when all the boys were there—when the marble floors rang from morning to night with their spurs and those of their endless guests. Delightful years—with Peregrine on diplomatic leave, and William philandering over half the countryside and tearing up and down from London, always in flight from some sentimental entanglement, over which they

chuckled and gossiped like people of the same age: and Beaufort importing rather intellectual and impressive young men who slightly alarmed his mother, until she got them to flirt with her. She felt the weight of those good years in her heart, and she felt their shadows in her eyes—which she allowed to fill with tears at this latest defection of her youngest son.

II

"I can't bear to think how Papa would look at it!" Like many daughters, Lady Edward evinced, when it suited her, a remarkable regard for her father's memory, of which, at other moments, she was equally forgetful.

"Don't be a hypocrite, Orry!" Pallas chuckled. "Why should Papa mind, so long as Lionel makes an honest living?" She turned to smile on her favourite nephew.

"Thank you, Pallas, there is no need for Lionel to make a living!"

"I'll probably be so bad," put in Lionel hastily, having seen the rising storm on his mother's face, "that the good Mr. Bird will kick me out before the end of the first quarter!"

"Edward! Do you suppose that Bird person will ever presume to lay a finger upon a Sax?"

Lord Edward smiled.

"Neither finger nor foot; of that you may rest assured, my love. So much the worse for our Lionel, who will probably be flattered into thinking himself a second Gainsborough, unless his common sense and the wit of his fellow students combine to put him in his proper place."

"You can trust them for that, Papa!" Lionel grinned ruefully. "Our Bristol townees are no bootlickers. I got more than a taste of what I may expect when I interviewed Mr. Bird."

"Do you mean they were impudent to you?" his mother demanded indignantly. Lionel caught his father's eye, and the pair of them burst out laughing. Pallas rose; she had to make all those larger, more important movements carefully these days, so as not to be betrayed by the treacherous little twinges that warned her, more often than she cared to acknowledge, of her age. But she managed, so far, with dignity; she did not look forward to the time when she would have to claim an arm for such offices.

"Well, since I have to make an early start in the morning——"

"Edward!" said Orabella, as sharply as though Pallas had not spoken. "I don't *want* Lionel to go into Bristol! Especially not into that low district where the drawing classes are held."

"It's one of the most picturesque parts of the whole town! You know, Papa, on Temple Backs, near the ferry——"

"A very hotbed of all the disgusting diseases! Supposing he catches the fever?" She shuddered in employing the euphemism which, in polite society, covered the dreaded name of smallpox, the bane of the century.

"If that's what's worrying you, Orry, why don't you send him to Dr. Jenner for the vaccine?"

"Don't be so disgusting! I won't let them pump some horrid stuff that comes out of cows into him!"

"The diminution of mortality in some places on the Continent, where vaccination is compulsory," said Lord Edward gravely, "has disposed most people to take Jenner's discovery seriously; they are even talking of giving him a Government grant."

"We live in a free country, and I, for one, would not submit to any compulsion," said Lady Edward grandly.

"Think what I'd have been spared, if vaccination had been compulsory ten years ago," said Pallas.

"Think what we'd all have been spared," retorted Orabella, "if you hadn't been so ridiculous and obstinate. Honestly, I thought I'd got enough to bear with all your nonsense about slaves; now it's paupers and prisons, and any sort of unsavoury trouble you can find to poke your nose into!"

"Dear Aunt Pallas, this is what you get for being the family heroine! You must own, Mama, that her work for the poor has made her famous all over the country."

"And given her smallpox, which she might have spread through the whole of the family," was the tart rejoinder. "You'd have thought that might have taught her a lesson, but, good gracious, she might never have heard of it. Thank heaven, at least, that you weren't even pitted," ended Orabella. It had seemed, indeed, like an Act of God, that the exquisite skin was left unblemished.

"As I seem to be in disfavour," smiled Pallas, "I think I will go to bed."

"No, please——!" cried Lionel. "I must have you here to help me win my battle with Mama." He linked his arm affectionately into his aunt's. "It's not true that you are going to-morrow, is it? You have been here so short a time—only to-day Rory was saying that she has seen hardly anything of you. Mama, do beg her to stay a little longer! I'm sure you owe at least as much to your relations as you do to all your Bristol scallywags!"

"You had better stay, Pallas, since Lionel feels he needs support against his mother!"

The bitterness took none of them by surprise; they were used to the pitiful and irrational flashes of jealousy that Orabella used to complicate her relationship with Lionel—as though a simple love were not enough: as though she must drive her breast upon a thorn, must sanctify with blood her maternal passion.

"I don't think," said Lord Edward slowly, "that we can deprive Lionel of what, rightly or wrongly, he regards as his career, for the sake of protecting him from diseases which, thanks to his good health and habits, he is unlikely to catch. We must let him try Bird's, Orry. If he shows promise, I'll see if my influence can procure him the interest of Lawrence."

"Papa!" Lionel's face was flaming. "For heaven's sake! I must know a great deal more than I do at present, before you speak about me to Mr. Lawrence!"

"I agree; and I must have some assurance that this enthusiasm you display at present for your paints and brushes is not a flash in the pan, which will flicker out under the drudgery of hard study."

"Why can't he go to Mr. Lawrence straight away? He could at least live at home, and be mixing in good society, instead of with all the riff-raff of Bristol."

"Go to bed, Lionel," said his father.

When the boy had gone, with the instant, pleasant obedience he had always shown to his father's commands—how different from the rebellious Peregrine, the mischievous William and the sly, diplomatic Beaufort!—Lord Edward turned to his wife.

"You needn't trouble about the society he keeps. If Lionel has a fault, it is that he is over-fastidious—and I'm not sure, yet, how that will fit into the career of an artist. To paint the truth, it seems to me one must see the truth; and Lionel is not quite in touch with realities. Either he ignores, or he over-romanticizes them." Instinctively he looked to Pallas for understanding; she made an almost imperceptible inclination of the head.

Orabella frowned and sighed

"It's strange he should be so different from the other boys, isn't it, Edward?"

"Variety, my love, is said to be the spice of life; so far as our children go, life has been prodigal of the spices!"

"I love him so much. I wish I understood him better."

"No one will ever understand Lionel completely," he comforted her. "There is something in him that evades common knowledge—perhaps deliberately." He thought, but did not voice his thought, that it was the self-protection of the artist; yes, Lionel needed all his self-protection. "In loving him, we give him something better than understanding."

"Well"—she shrugged her shoulders—"I suppose there is nothing to do but go to bed."

"Has Aurora gone?"

"She went two hours ago. Perry has a little fever."

He glanced at the clock.

"I have to be up early to see the bailiff. It's about the cottages down by the mill."

"Are they grumbling about the rents again?" asked his wife.

"My dear, they can't afford to pay them." His brows gathered, and a cloud darkened his kind grey eyes.

"What is it, Edward?"

It struck him, as he turned to Pallas, that she looked utterly exhausted: as though nothing but the spirit within bore her up. She was incredibly beautiful, in her fined-down skeleton thinness: he remembered Lionel telling him that Pallas had the most faultless bones he had ever seen, that he longed to acquire the skill to paint her.

"You know how it is in Bristol. It's no better out here. Half our families are starving. We do what we can," he said wearily, "but it's only a drop in the ocean."

"Edward!" Orabella had come to her husband's side; the irritation had dropped from her with Lionel's departure—strange that they loved each other so, yet that he generated in her always this mood of friction. It was not so when they were alone; but when others were present, it was as though she could not endure that he should pay any one but her a flicker of attention. She reached up and stroked Lord Edward's temple tenderly. "I wish you would let us go up to London. You could do all you wish from there, and

you would not always be distressed by the sight of misery you can do nothing about."

He shook his head.

"One does not avoid evil by running away from it. Paragon has always looked to its masters in times of trouble. The very knowledge we are here helps in some way to comfort the poor souls and to relieve their burden. If we were to go to town—it may sound foolish, but it would seem as though God had deserted them."

"Is there no talk of peace, Edward?" Pallas's voice was low. He looked at her, without answering; he knew, as well as she, that peace might come, to a ruined country, too late.

"Well, I suppose we must keep our hearts up as best we can," said Orabella cheerfully. "We're asked to take tea with the Cholmondeleys, Edward. I must say I was surprised, last time we were there, to see the style they still keep up—Elizabeth with her hair fully powdered, and she told me she'd had to pay a guinea for a little box of flour that was stolen from someone's mill; and I was quite ashamed of my limp ruffles——"

"You should be proud of them, my dear; they show you are doing your duty by your country."

"I'm very fond of my country, and I won't be preached at!" She dimpled in the way that had first drawn his eyes upon her. "And I don't suppose the French will invade us because I've eaten sweet buns at Elizabeth Cholmondeley's tea!"

"If there is anything I can do, Edward," said Pallas, "you know you have only to command me."

"She's already doing far too much," cried Orabella, as Lord Edward pressed Pallas's hand gratefully. "You've heard the latest mad scheme of hers? She wants to turn that old house of the Floods into an asylum, and I'm sure she's capable of setting herself up there to look after the lunatics!"

"Something of the sort is certainly needed——"

"Oh, come to bed, and let's have no more horrors!"

"Will you be so kind," Pallas asked her brother-in-law, "as to ring for Pilgrim?"

III

"My dear, I have some news, which I kept until we were alone."

Her hand flew to her heart. For Orabella, as for thousands of women in the British Isles, the word "news" had only an evil connotation. Seeing her pale, he went on quickly:

"Beaufort is coming home."

"Beau!"

Her voice rang like a bell. If she could ever have been brought to admit the truth, Orabella must have acknowledged that Beaufort was the least favoured of her sons; but degrees of affection count for little when one has not set eyes on one's own flesh and blood for nearly three years.

"Oh, Edward, tell me more."

"I have not much to tell; you know what Beaufort's letters amount to—

I will show it to you presently, to judge for yourself. I can only guess that the cession of Trinidad has closed our present diplomatic relations with Spain——”

“Don’t talk about diplomatic relations—you know very well I never understand what they are! Beaufort coming home; how soon will he be here?”

“I cannot say certainly, but I should think within a month, or six weeks, perhaps, if he has to break his journey in London. There is another matter, which may complicate his movements.”

“What is that? Pray do go on, Edward!” his wife was crying.

“He is escorting a Spanish lady.”

“A Spanish——?” Her lips fell apart; a look of sudden fear came into her still lovely eyes. “A *Spanish* lady, Edward? But who is she? And why is Beaufort——?”

“My dear, I’ve told you all I know. He requests our hospitality here, at Paragon, in behalf of a Spanish lady.”

Her knees were trembling; she sat suddenly in the chair which he had placed behind her.

“Does it mean that he—that he——?”

“We can’t gain anything by conjecture, dear heart,” he told her, taking her small, plump hand in his.

“But—but——” She stiffened suddenly. “Aren’t all Spaniards Catholics?”

“I believe that is so.”

“Edward—Edward: Beaufort—a Catholic!” The tears were pouring down her quivering face.

“My dearest, we mustn’t jump to conclusions. This may be no more than a service he is called upon to perform in the course of his diplomatic duties.”

“Diplomatic duties!” Her look, her tone scorned such optimism. “Would he bring her to this house, ‘in the course of his diplomatic duties’? Edward, I won’t have it—a papist, a foreigner, here at Paragon!”

He sighed, relinquishing her hand, and went to the window, to look out across the starlit lawn, across which Saxons had gazed for seven generations. Reason strove with instinct, and was defeated.

Of all his children, Beaufort was the only one who would have written in those cold terms, without explanation of his immediate plans. Beaufort alone was capable of bringing a wife to Paragon as coolly, with as little preamble as he would bring a new horse or dog. Beaufort alone was wholly indifferent to the effect of his actions on other people: with no calculated indifference, but simply because, ever since his childhood, he had always regarded himself—and, to do him justice, other people—as though he, and they, were isolated within themselves, as though flesh, and hair, and clothes formed an insulating trinity that permitted no contact, save that which was willed, between one human soul and another.

And while Orabella thought only of the personal issue—of the embarrassment and annoyance of having a stranger in the house, whose words and whose ways would be alike inexplicable, and whose religion was antipathetic to most English Protestants, Lord Edward looked ahead. His son Peregrine had left two little bouncing girls, and a boy so delicate that his health was a continual anxiety to his devoted mother; doctors had warned them of the

extreme unlikelihood of little Perry's survival beyond the days of childhood—a fact which his relations had accepted with eighteenth-century fatalism.

William, so far, was childless, and was, in any case, the third son. Was the heir to Paragon to have the blood of Spanish papists in his veins?

He thought also of an old, antipathetic half-brother, the holder of the marquisate, whose death was expected from day to day. The Mildenhall title and estates might fall at any moment into his hands: Mildenhall, the creation which, in the reign of Henry VIII, had ennobled a family of honest country squires, one of whom had rendered his sovereign such service that the lavish young king had rewarded him in a fashion that had grievously annoyed some of the older nobles.

Beaufort would one day become Lord Mildenhall: was it conceivable that he had forgotten that?

CHAPTER II

I

ALMOST any other city, she was thinking, as the coach lurched down the steep of Brislington, might in the last fifty years have shown signs of advancement. Not so Bristol—too wealthy to be enterprising, too satisfied with its successes in the well-beaten paths of commerce to trouble about the striking out of new ones. Enriched by its trade with Spain and the West Indies, it continued to behave as though Lancashire and Yorkshire had no existence; Liverpool was an upstart rival, to be ignored rather than propitiated; the cheap woollen goods with which the West Riding challenged West Country markets were not seriously to be considered. With touching confidence in quality, as opposed to quantity, Bristol saw no reason, in spite of the local cheapness of labour and fuel, for exploiting these advantages at the expense of rivals it despised.

From their mansions in Queen Square and College Green (both sufficiently removed from the blot of Kingsdown for their occupants conveniently to overlook the unpleasant consequences of the financial panic of '93) the merchant princes were content equally to ignore the plight of their dependants—those seething multitudes packed into the hook of land that separated Frome from Avon rivers: that stifled and sweated and sickened and died, many of them, in fifteenth-century tenements. No, indeed; the merchants were not going to dip into their cosy accounts with Messrs. Elton, Lloyd, Knox, Walker and Hale, of Broad Street, for the relief of conditions which all who did not share them regarded as inevitable. No less a person than the sheriff himself took Pallas to task when she made demand for a public inquiry into the state of affairs round and about New Market.

"Why, Miss Burmester, should we exercise ourselves about such matters? There is no city in England"—Mr. Fripp's waistcoat swelled—"so munificently bestowed as our own with charitable establishments for the deserving poor! What about our almshouses—Foster's, Blanchard's, Ridley's, Fry's? not to speak of Stokes' Croft, and the excellent building erected in your father's time for impoverished spinsters, in St. John's Lane."

"All the poor, sir, are not deserving—in the sense you mean; it does not, however, deprive them of their right, as human beings, to breathe fresh air and to lie down in cleanliness."

"You would subsidize felony?" The sheriff was scandalized.

"We are not considering felony, Mr. Sheriff: though I might point out to you that felony, in no minority of cases, is the direct outcome of surroundings. You could hardly do better, if you wish to raise a race of felons, than to enclose men and women in those hovels at the back of Cyder-House Lane."

"To which I sincerely hope, Miss Burmester, you have never penetrated! What is to become of female delicacy, of female reputation——!" The worthy sheriff appeared to strangle with his horror.

"Mr. Fripp." Her gloved hand tapped the desk, within her muff the other hand lay clenched upon her waning patience. "You may leave my delicacy, as well as my reputation, out of the question; for the latter, you will find

the greater part of Bristol prepared to vouch, and the former is my own affair!"

He started some blustering apology, which she checked with an imperious gesture.

"I am accustomed to reproof for my meddlesomeness in matters which are not supposed to concern me! I have, however, inherited enough property from my father to feel that I have a stake in the welfare of Bristol, and some right to concern myself with its social and moral standing. Although my sex debars me from freemanship, and I may not even hold civic office, it does not confine me within the four walls of my house and garden. I have eyes, ears—and a nose, Mr. Sheriff!" She paused ironically. "I am aware my remarks are unwelcome: doubly unwelcome because I am a woman, and have no husband on whom to shelve my opinions. But if common humanity does not stir you to take action in the matter of these disgraceful hovels——"

He shifted miserably upon his cushioned seat, while she rested her chin upon the hands she had linked upon the crook of her stick, and her eyes stared haggardly from the wreck of her one-time beauty.

"In the markets they are asking one hundred and fifty-nine shillings and sixpence for a quarter of wheat; the minimum weight of a shilling loaf of standard wheat bread is two pounds ten and a half ounces, and bread costs the people fourpence a pound."

"What can you expect? We have had bad harvests for the last five years."

"Families are being brought up on a diet of rotten potatoes," she went on, as though she had not heard him, "and in the poor-law institutions they are eating the poultices for the sake of the linseed and turnips inside. While this is going on, the Common Council increases the Mayor's allowance to one thousand five hundred pounds; the theatre obtains a grant for rebuilding and decoration, while in Broadmead women whose homes have been destroyed by the floods are giving birth to their children in courts and alleys; the House of Commons votes fifty thousand pounds for the relief of the famishing poor, and, owing to the indifference of our civic authorities, Bristol receives one cargo of herrings——"

"I have nothing to do with those things!"

"—which," she pursued inexorably, "are left rotting on the quays, so that half of them are putrid before they are distributed and, of those who eat them, many sicken of poisoning and the fever"

"All these things are the natural consequences of war, Mistress Burmester!" By now the sheriff was an angry man. "Let you confine yourself to matters on which you are properly informed! Get on with your Abolition—there's sufficient there, isn't there, to keep you out of mischief? And if it's not enough, there is a plenty of charities a woman can occupy herself about, without forfeiting her standing among the respectable."

"Walter Fripp! It is some forty years since you proposed marriage to me. It seems," said Pallas, "as though you now take advantage of the consideration I then displayed, to address me in terms which now I decline to accept!"

The sheriff turned purple and looked hastily round; cursed with a jealous wife, he did not relish the reports of this conversation reaching his home on College Green

"There's always plenty to do among the almshouses," he mumbled.

"Among the tidy, approved poor!" she mocked him. "And there are always a score of benevolent ladies who will look after them and preen themselves on their convenient generosity! Yes; we do well to build almshouses—as sops to our conscience; but what about our hospitals and prisons? We don't look into things there, do we? The pauper is unsavoury enough, in a state of health and virtue, without approaching him when he is sick or criminal. We give him an environment that robs him of his health and his virtue, then jail him to save ourselves further trouble!"

She rose, leaning heavily on her stick.

"I'm no longer a young woman, Mr. Sheriff, and such strength as I have I'll save for those it may advantage. I've wasted a deal of breath!" She gave her beautiful, wry smile, for which she was forgiven much, even by those who most bitterly opposed all that she stood for. "I don't forget you have ten years advantage of me, Master Fripp! Perhaps by the time you are my age you will have learned to respect the warnings of an old woman."

"Warnings?" he cried. Like every one else, he knew Pallas Burmester could be an implacable enemy.

"Yes, warnings. I have no official power, but I'm not without influence—as your uncle, John Peddy, found out over the slave trade. You recommend me, by the way, to pursue my efforts in the cause of Abolition. A timely reminder, sir! Your own subscription being somewhat overdue, you will perhaps be glad to be spared the trouble of a messenger?" As she held out her hand, Pallas's eyes were twinkling.

"You ain't getting on very fast with your Abolition." His face was crimson, as he rooted in his pockets. The twinkle vanished, Miss Burmester's expression was grim as she reflected that this, substantially, was true; the Bill to abolish that part of the trade by which British merchants supplied foreign settlements with slaves, after its renewal in the Commons, had been defeated in the Lords, and, so far as Parliament was concerned, the question of slavery had lain for six years in abeyance: six intolerable years for those who carried on the struggle against an apparently impersuadable government lethargy. All of her own obstinacy rose, however, against the implied accusation.

"You can hardly say that, when we have not one slaver trading out of Bristol to-day," she retorted, as she pocketed the coins he reluctantly gave her. "It isn't the first time public opinion has travelled ahead of British law, Mr. Fripp! and it won't be the last. We shall win our battle, and when the terms of peace come to be signed, you'll perhaps recall that it was I who helped to dictate them. Oh, no; I'm not being vainglorious. We're old friends, Walter; and it is as an old friend that I beg to remind you that, civic nonentity though I may be, my word carries some weight in Bristol—and beyond."

"And as an old friend, I'll remind you, ma'am, that you've made a deal of enemies in Bristol!" There was a note of satisfaction in his voice.

She stared, laughed, and seemed to brush the subject aside.

"I'll get on with my work; but if I have reason to suspect obstructiveness from you, or from any member of your council, Mr. Sheriff, I'll pillory the lot of you. I love Bristol, but the name of Bristol shall be a by-word in decent society. Think it over. And now," she added, "have the goodness to summon my woman; I'm not so good on your twisting stairs as I was twenty years ago!"

The memory of this conversation was in her mind, as the coach clattered along the Old Market and past the Pie Poudre Court, past which, nearly forty years ago, Matthew Flood came riding to claim his inheritance, with all Bristol pouring out with torches to receive him.

"Do you smell the river, Pilgrim?"

"Yes, miss. I do love the smell of Bristol; it smells of home."

II

Along the wharves, from Wapping to Temple Meads, from St. Austin's to the Bridge, the passing of forty years had left its melancholy traces. That seething, lively, savage activity had largely vanished, the romantic quality—for those who liked to call it so—had dwindled in proportion with the dwindling of the personalities that evoked it. Always, along a waterfront, there is a stirring of the airs of adventure: the young feel it and hear it in the creak of cordage, in the slap of waters that faintly echo the orchestration of the deep seas. Where there is the smell of tar, the faint rise and fall of wooden platforms, there the blood is bound to quicken, the spirit strain a little at its cables of land-bondage: *Hark, hark, my soul, and Beyond, beyond Beyond there lies . . . ?*

But who in Bristol had time to dream of those days? And if one dreamed, was not the dream shattered by rude reality? Along the waterfront, seeking the sunny patches, the bits of masonry that screened them from the wind, were the cripples, the one-legged, the one-eyed population whose minds (when these were capable of withdrawal from their empty stomachs) went ravelling over the eternal question: whether life were a thing to be glad of, or whether death were better than the lot a grateful nation prepares for its heroes. Clustered together in their misery, like heaps of human dung, the wreckage of the wars had caused the wharves to be avoided by decently clad individuals, whose appearance was signal for an instant outbreak of solicitation: Pity the blind, pity the lame, pity the starving. Half-naked children with wild eyes and little, claw-like hands ran about, begging from strangers, or lent their weakness to the support of some father or elder brother more helpless than themselves. Good-hearted people strove to spare a farthing; but there were others, pushing their shabby finery in and out of the quayside taverns, smart coats hanging like rags on deflated bodies, and an intimate acquaintance with hell in eyes that the prudent avoided.

Here were the bitter lees of the slave trade, as good as dead in Bristol, although it continued to flourish, albeit under difficulties, in Liverpool.

In the year 1783 the Quakers had taken the lead in the formation of an association "for the relief and liberation of the negro slaves in the West Indies, and for the discouragement of the slave trade on the coast of Africa." It was the first recognized society established in England for the abolition of slavery, and enlisted immediate support from the many scattered bodies and individuals who had striven, without the advantages of unity or organization, to the same end. Among the many notable champions the cause had brought forth was a young man named Wilberforce, who, having made acquaintance of the winner of the Cambridge Latin prize dissertation of 1785—the subject, set by the Vice-Chancellor, himself an ardent Abolitionist,

was "*An liceat invitos in servitutem dare*"—became not merely a convert to the new creed, but its most militant supporter. The names of Clarkson and Wilberforce streamed like a banner across the country, attracting followers wherever Christian principle triumphed over material gain. A Committee was formed on the 22nd of May, 1787, for the abolition of the slave trade, under the presidency of Granville Sharp, and among the names of those who laboured earnestly and unremittingly for the procuration of information and monetary support for those who pleaded the cause in Parliament, that of Pallas Burmester took a high place.

Bristol was one of the first ports, making the best of a bad job, to surrender. Bristol smirked at its northern rival, and congratulated itself on knowing the moment for getting out. Let Liverpool continue, and ruin itself: Bristol traders, with their snug bank balances and omnipresent evidence of material prosperity, could now afford to go holy, and espouse the fashionable cause of Abolition. Abolition meant smuggling, and smuggling, later on, was going to pay. In the meanwhile, it was more expedient to accept the Government grants for converting their vessels into transport: while a few confidential gentlemen were working on plans which would enable an innocent-seeming trader to pack the human cargo whose price would hit the beam as soon as the Abolitionists had pushed their Bill through Parliament.

So the mercantile gentry licked their chops and congratulated themselves on their perspicacity: added more glass and china to their collections and encouraged their daughters to practise the pianoforte, while consternation spread among that vast community which had drawn its life-blood from the trade; even those who, in supporting, had cursed it, cursed more bitterly on finding their occupation gone. Slave trade had brought comfort and security, even a degree of luxury, to many relatively humble households; there had been none like the slaver captains for spending money when the ships were in port. For those who rejoiced at the passing of its shame, there were hundreds more who felt that the glory had departed from Bristol.

J. R. Bowling strolled along the waterfront, looking with love upon the scene he had once thought never to see again. The nephew who walked with him, stiff in his sergeant's uniform, was alive to the interest caused by their passing, while affecting to belittle his uncle's rapt recollections of bygone days.

"Ay, Bristol's all right; but what about Lunnon? They say the Lunnon docks puts ours to shame," said young Nathaniel, more for the fun of rousing his uncle's ire than because, as a stout Bristolian, he believed in the pretensions of the metropolis.

"Lunnon?" The old, wizened lips twisted. "I seen Lunnon, boy; I sailed up Thames river, and a miserable, dirty stream it is, with mud on either side as far as eye can carry. Have you seen ought more noble than our Avon? To sail up Avon after twelve months at sea's like a festival; there ain't a buttercup on Avon banks that don't sing out to you, and the green's like balm on the eyes. Cully, you don't know how fair a place it is, till your hopes of seeing it again go down with the setting sun."

"There's Mr. Peddy, Uncle," interrupted his nephew. "He's bidding you good-day." Sergeant Nathaniel stuck out his chest and brought his hand smartly to the salute.

With no less smartness the freckled hand of J. R. Bowling went to his hat

brim; the rheumy blue eyes brightened with a sudden, swift pleasure—that died quickly away.

"I thought you meant . . . 'Tis only Mr. Richard," he murmured.

"Why, who else should it be?"

"Mr. Peddy—there's only one Mr. Peddy"

"Now then, Uncle, come up! Old Mr. John's been dead these thirteen years. You mustn't be dozy!" reproached the nephew, not unkindly. He was, indeed, very proud to be seen strolling on the Backs in the company of the sole survivor of the *Cassiopæia*.

Every day, at much the same hour, J. R. Bowling made his short journey from his little domicile in the Merchant Adventurers' almshouses to the wharves, taking the greetings of high and low soberly, as he passed with his rolling, sailor's gait down the broad, salt-smelling highway of Prince's Street. His tidy, shabby figure, his quiet manner, above all, his reticence, recommended him to every one, as his fame gave him standing, not only along the wharves, but throughout the town. For a man of J. R. Bowling's modest and humble nature to find himself a celebrity had been something of a shock, but his shrewd common sense had saved it from turning his head, so, whether he was addressing "young" Mr. Peddy, or one of the scallywags of the Backs, his manner was always the same: grave, polite, a little formal, as of one assured of his importance, but resolved never to presume on it.

"Good-morning, Bowling! Have you come down to help us receive our prisoners?"

The youngest, and only surviving son of John Peddy, a stout, patronizing individual of forty-five, halted, hand on stick, to send a self-congratulatory smile round his immediate surroundings. Richard Peddy made much capital out of heredity; almost entirely lacking in those qualities that give a man status among his contemporaries, he was never known to miss an opportunity of emphasizing his importance as head of the shipping firm his father had founded. Fawning on his superiors, and bullying those he regarded as his inferiors, he clung feverishly to the illusion of his own popularity. Such illusion was easily fostered by a little conversation with a well-spoken, respectful fellow like Bowling, a city hero—almost as important a person, in his low station of life, as Mr. Richard Peddy in his lofty one!

"Ay, ay, sir. My nephew Nathaniel—that I beg leave to present, sir"—Peddy acknowledged with a curt nod the sergeant's second salute—"tells me we're expecting 'em in, and 'tis a way of passing time that hangs heavy, sir, on the hands of an old sailor."

"Here they come." Richard Peddy lifted his malacca, and pointed to the silver, almost unruffled band of the river, up which, lumbering, lopsided, with an air of sluttish indifference that, in the opinion of J. R. Bowling, shamed her commander, came an old brig.

"'Tis not a ship of yours, sir?"

Peddy shook his head. "No, it's one of Massey's."

"Cap'n Crown wouldn't have brought his ship in like that!" The old man spoke with a proud, calculated satisfaction. "We might be spewing our caulks from stem to stern, and sweating our souls out at the pumps: but it would have been all flags out and the crew cheering to split their throats along the bulwarks!"

"I suppose," said Peddy, on a light note of contempt, "you're one of the old tars who consider shipping isn't what it was? This is war-time, my man, and show counts for less than achievement, when we're out to beat the enemy."

"Begging your pardon, sir, sometimes, aboard ship, show's a sign of achievement. It's only nateral the lads should be proud of what's been accomplished; a good captain knows this, and encourages 'em to make a brave show when the ship comes into port."

Nathaniel saw the look, both satirical and annoyed, on the other's face, and nudged his uncle. J. R. Bowling, however, ignored the warning.

"How many would there be, sir, in this lot that's just coming in?"

"They say three hundred in this batch."

The ship was wearing towards the quay; a few heads were turned apathetically, although there was no sign or movement from the loungers who watched its approach.

"Three hundred! In God's name, sir, where're they going to be put?"

"Your nephew should answer that. What are your orders?" Peddy turned to Nathaniel.

"This lot's for Fishponds, sir; but, as my uncle says, where in blazes they're going to stow 'em, maybe the Lord knows!"

"Mind your own business, my good fellow; the prison authorities will have their instructions," was the terse rejoinder.

"Things is bad, they say, at Fishponds." J. R. Bowling wagged his head.

"I should not trouble myself, if I were you, Bowling! A too great solicitude for the prisoners' welfare might easily, in these days, be accounted for treachery."

"If all in Bristol were as little treacherous as I, Mr. Peddy," was the sober response, "there'd be little need to go spy-hunting after dark."

"You should not take offence at a jest, my man! Here they come: hooray!"

The isolated cheer drew all eyes towards the three men; blank eyes, waxen faces turned in their direction with a horrifying effect of death-in-life; not a mouth was opened to echo the cheer.

"What are these scum about? Haven't they got any feeling for their king and country? Don't they know that every prisoner brought into Bristol means one less to fight for the accursed French?"

"They know, sir, that every foreigner that comes into this country means less bread for Englishmen. King and country; them's grand words, sir, on a full stomach; but can't you see, sir, how they sounds to the poor folk here? They're but poor, ig'orant varmint's that must be pardoned their iggerance; but seeing that neither king nor country puts food into the mouths of their starving babbies, nor covers them from the cold, 'tis hard for 'em to shout 'Hooray' when furriners comes ashore to rob them of the little they have. Mr. Peddy, Bristol's already carrying more than its quota of war prisoners; where's it going to stop?"

"You had better take care, Bowling: you had better take care! A man like you had better keep a still tongue in his head at times like these!"

As the irate figure of the shipowner stumped off along the cobbles, Nathaniel turned angrily to his uncle.

"Now what's the good of falling foul of a man like Peddy, Uncle? He can

do you no end of harm if he chooses—he might even turn you out of the almshouse; and then where'd you be, I'd like to know? I couldn't keep you!" he ended, on a note of injury.

"Wait till you're asked, cully."

The short, sturdy figure, with a wistful look in its faded sea-blue eyes, struck by its very independence a note of affection in Nathaniel's heart. He slapped his uncle on the shoulder admiringly.

"A reg'lar old fighting cock, that's what you are! And I'd like to know how many of them bleedin' pirates you took on with your own hand—you old oyster, you! Come on now," he pleaded, "there's just time for a drink before I pick up my charges, and there's enough dust to dry you up between here and Fishponds!"

When they stood in the bar of the Dolphin and Spanker, he lowered his voice to a note of caution.

"Not as you ain't right, Uncle, in what you said to Peddy. If you ask my opinion, the 'thorities has got more'n they can handle these days." The gallant sergeant stretched himself with an air of one who feels himself superior to bureaucracies. "All at each other's throats an' squabbling like wild-cats! Here's Fishponds threatening us with Whitehall unless we stop in-drafting prisoners; here's St. Peter's grumbling at getting the overflow from Newgate, and Newgate telling the lot of 'em to get to hell, and all the town up in arms over the money that was subscribed to stop the new Act about the county rates coming into force. It ain't no wonder we can't win our battles in furrin parts, when it seems like we can't handle our affairs at home."

J. R. Bowling looked dimly round the tavern. Yes, even here, it looked as though things were not the way they ought to be: there were no more gold-laced captains ordering noggins of rum for all the company, no rumble and roar of argument, no splendour of reflected glory from the few silent nondescripts who sat at the tables, spinning out their drinks that few of them could rightly afford. A disturbing quiet lay over all: a quiet of lack of employment, lack of custom, lack of optimism for the future. It was not the war; no one pretended any longer that it was the war. Thanks to its own Corporation, Bristol was no longer the second city in the kingdom; like a surfeited animal, it was dying of its own greed. Who would pay the exorbitant shipping duties levied on incoming vessels, or undertake the difficult navigation of Avon, when there was Liverpool, with her relatively moderate rates and commodious channel to invite trade?

The miserable string of the prisoners was trailing over the landing-plank when J. R. Bowling, who had met friends, emerged from the Dolphin and Spanker. A crowd of spectators had gathered, and there was some clownish amusement at the sound of the foreign tongues. The prisoners were in pitiful condition, their faces covered with savage growths of beard, their scanty clothes soaked with bilge; an intolerable stench of starvation and filth went up from the group that stood shivering on the wharf, to be clumsily marshalled into lines by the swaggering Nathaniel, under the eye of an elegant young lieutenant of the Bristol Volunteers. "Is that the lot?"

"There's four dead, seven that seemingly can't stand on their feet, and one that seems to be lunatic, sir," reported the ensign, who stood with the captain at the head of the gang-plank, checking the prisoners as they descended.

"The dead's none of our business."

The captain nodded agreement with this reasonable decision, and a sinister-looking individual at his elbow made another couple of knots in his tally-rope. Two of the corpses had been sunk at the entrance to the Avon, but there was always a lively trade in bodies in Bristol; public dissections were a favoured form of entertainment, and the height of *chic* among the younger Bristol decadents was the possession of a volume or two of *facetiæ* bound in a murderer's skin. The hide of a French prisoner should prove a least as marketable a commodity as the foregoing, in the estimation of the dealer.

"Get the other seven ashore, and put the madman in irons!"

There was great excitement as word spread of the lunatic, and the soldiers at once had their work cut out in beating off the crowd which pressed upon the prisoners, hardly less wretched than they. Mr. Richard Peddy, who had imprudently placed himself too near the gang-plank, cried out with resentment, in which was no small measure of fear, as he found himself engulfed in the malodorous mob, through which the flame of brutality went like wild-fire. J. R. Bowling, a small, light man, was hurled back by screaming trulls, availing themselves of the confusion to make contact with men who, not having seen women for weeks, were only prevented by the shackles on their wrists from breaking away from the guard.

The scene became one of unparalleled riot, famine was forgotten, the origin of the excitement was forgotten, when the bellowing of the officers made itself heard, and the guard drew their sabres. Screams ran along the Backs, and echoed in the chaste spaces of Queen Square, and even so far as The Bridge, where the coach of Miss Pallas Burmester was halted by the crowds who came running from the market, down King's Street, Baldwin's Street and along the Old Shambles, cutting off the escape of those who strove to evade the assault of the guard, which was further reinforced by the sailors, who had jumped ashore to reinforce the military.

J. R. Bowling, at the risk of his life, dragged a shrieking girl out of range of a sabre-cut that missed by only a fraction the tattered scarecrow that was the erstwhile debonair Mr. Richard Peddy. Men with wooden legs rolled cursing on the ground among the feet of the mob, while from the prisoners, penned for safety against the wall, came a continuous high-pitched supplication to the Virgin and the saints. *Seigneur dieu!* This was worse than warfare. To what barbarous country had they come?

When the panting guard had cleared a blood-splashed space in front of their captives, a single cry, riding like a bubble on the surface of the dying clamour, swung the attention of the spectators to a new issue.

"There—look, there he is!"

Partly astride the bulwarks had appeared a figure which rewarded them for their pain and terror: a figure partly naked, partly covered in a tattered blanket that was knotted about its waist; hairy as a wild man, brows, beard and hair all matted together, so that the whole face, lost as in a thicket, had no human semblance, but for the glaring eyes. This fantastic being stretched out its arms as though to clutch the universe in a death-dealing embrace, while its fingers worked as though upon the throats of its enemies. From its massive and hair-blackened chest boomed the voice of a baboon. A sudden silence of amaze fell upon the onlookers.

The creature—it was hardly to be called a man—was speaking: but none who listened had ever heard that tongue before. There were many who could identify the French, a few who could speak it. Dutch, Spanish and Italian accents were almost as familiar to the waterfront population as its native tongue.

So, under the thin, grey, winter sky, in the wind that fluttered his rags, a madman addressed his god, or the elements, or his audience of awestricken listeners, and none could tell which it was that evoked that torrent of language; but it was plain that the very words he used were torment to him, that he writhed under some sense of obscure defeat, that his frenzied gestures were intended to make clear his meaning, and that his perception of their failure to do so drove him to further excesses of despair.

“What do he speak?”

“Where do he come from?”

In a trice rumours went drifting about the quay; phrases were snatched from the lips of the sailors, and whipped hither and thither among the crowd.

“‘Tain’t a Crappo!” “Maybe ’tis Portugee.” “‘Tain’t no Portugee.” “Some heathen wild man, as the Crappos seized in naval action.” “What be he crying for?” “He be crying for drink, poor toad. Hark’ee: he be crying it over and over again—maybe ’tis his furrin lingo for water.” “For rum, more like!” A shriek of laughter punctuated this observation.

A furious figure now thrust itself into the foreground: Mr. Richard Peddy, threatening action against a military force that could not protect the safety of its citizens. A titter shook the mob, for Mr. Peddy, with his shirt dragged out, a stocking dangling to reveal a skinny calf which contrasted oddly with the other sleek, well-padded limb, did not present an impressive appearance.

“Old moll!” “His da would have settled this lot with his walking-stick.” “Ay, it’s pity there’s none of the old ’uns left.”

J. R. Bowling put a hand to the head which latterly had begun to remind him, with “swimmy” sensations and small, vague pains, that he was getting a very old man. He suddenly started to walk, as if there was no one there; the odd part was that no one seemed to get in his way. He walked, free and lonely, as he had walked that day among the sandhills, with the vultures wheeling over his head: seeking, seeking. Masts and buildings melted; there was nothing about him but the white, eternal sand, and, when he stumbled, it was not upon a cobble, but over the bleached skull of a desert animal. He felt his heart thudding in his breast, and knew suddenly that he was dreaming; it was a dream that visited him frequently, the dream from which he awoke, invariably, with a parched and burning throat, and his heart knocking so hard against his breast-bone that it was like an internal bruise; he had to lie a long time, gasping, before he recovered from that dream.

“Bowling!”

His steps faltered; he stood, wavering, while it all flowed back on him; the familiar shapes of roofs and walls, the tangle of rigging, the bridge . . . and the face of Pallas Burmester at the window of her coach: the face whose traditional beauty, that once burnt up the hearts of Bristol, was familiar to J. R. Bowling, as it was familiar to every person in the town. He was ashamed, as usual, to meet that face, although she had given him many proofs of her forgiveness; indeed, it was only his inner, unreasoning sense of guilt that

made him read condemnation into the empty glory of her eyes. He went unsteadily towards the door of the coach, his old, three-cornered hat in his hand; he looked at her like a dog which, conscious of its fault, awaits the punishment. Yet she spoke kindly, even with a sort of tenderness, to him.

"What is going on, down there, on the quays?"

"'Tis the prisoners, ma'am; they've just brought them ashore."

"What, *more*?" Her accents showed her consternation. "God help them! What is to become of them?" She turned to her companion, as though the latter could furnish the answer to her question, then quickly back to the old man who stood patiently out in the cold wind. "But why are the people so excited? Surely they are used to seeing prisoners by now."

"It seems there's a madman among them, poor souls!" He sighed gently, in his eyes was still the dazzle of white sand, the dizzy circling of vultures; they circled there, above Miss Pallas Burmester's head—he wondered if she saw them.

"What will they do with him?"

"Looks like they'll put him in the madhouse, ma'am; there ain't no 'commodation for the like of he at Fishponds."

She was silent; the vultures thinned out, and vanished. J. R. Bowling straightened his tired shoulders and waited her mysterious pleasure; and again, it was the desert, and there was no one, save himself and her, seeking a dead hope in each other's eyes.

"Go home, Bowling." Her voice was like a warm hand laid on his unsteady heart. "We are too old, the pair of us, to be out late on winter afternoons!" But it was as though she mocked her own age, and the gloved hand that came through the window of the coach, to press a silver coin into his, was shaped as exquisitely as a girl's. "God bless you; I shall see you soon."

Some called her hard, and feared her; but to him, since that day she had sent for him, to hear his shameful story, she had been a very angel. Yet, as the coach rolled on, and he bent his slow steps towards King's Street, there was a heaviness in his heart for which he could not account; an unease, a formless foreboding, and, strangest of all, a feeling of running away from something which he should have seen out to its bitter end.

He pushed open the gate into the little courtyard, where the low white buildings clustered about the flagstaff down which, as he entered, the ensign was fluttering.

"Freed from all storms, the tempest and the rage
Of billows, here we spend our age.
Our weatherbeaten vessels have repair,
And from the Merchants' kind and generous care
Find harbour here: no more we put to sea
Until we launch into Eternity."

What be he crying for?

He be crying for drink, poor toad. Hark'ee: he be crying it over and over again—maybe it's his furrin lingo for water.

For rum, more like!

Or for a friend?

CHAPTER III

I

It was Clara Wardell—one time Clara Peddy—who said it: annoyed because she had expected to be given a lift home in Pallas's carriage. Nobody else would have dared to assault the ruling of "the Society's" Queen.

"Well, if a salary's paid, I do think the committee's got a right to expect the work to be properly done."

"The salary doesn't come out of your pocket, Clara; and, by the way, isn't it a little grand to speak of it as a salary? If people give their time and trouble they deserve compensation."

"All our work's supposed to be voluntary, isn't it? It used to be at any rate, in the old days."

Pallas's quizzical look was intended to remind her that she had not been a member in "the old days." The membership of Mrs. Clara Wardell, daughter of John Peddy, famous leader of the slaving interest, dated from the time when Abolitionism was supposed to confer social *cachet* on its supporters; and Clara, in her shabby, pretentious gown, clung hard by social *cachet*.

"The last minutes were practically illegible, and there's twice been mistakes in the accounts."

"If there were, you may be sure they were to our advantage," smiled Pallas.

"Oh, it's no good talking to you. But I'm surprised you don't realize that it's quite time we had a proper secretary, instead of that old scarecrow of an Amelia Flood! She's quite a laughing-stock in the town, and I'm sure she makes a bad impression when important people visit us. Mr. Wilberforce was quite baffled, with her old black bonnet wagging in his face, and her rude manners! I should have thought our need was to propitiate people, not to offend them."

"I don't think Mr. Wilberforce needs propitiation, Clara. By the way, have you heard from Polly?"

The other's lined, fretful face stiffened.

"Oh, yes. She writes every week."

"I hope she's happy at Paragon."

"I don't quite know why you should expect a person to be happy, Pallas, when she is forced to occupy a menial situation——"

"Come now! You can hardly term helping an old friend 'a menial situation.'"

Clara gave a shrill laugh.

"Oh, I don't think Lady Edward Sax would call herself that, these days! I doubt if she remembers Bristol at all."

"She has a very full life, you know, between Paragon and the town house; but I can assure you she doesn't forget old friends. She would be delighted, Clara, if you were to visit her."

"I dare say! As I don't happen to have coaches and servants to take me about the countryside, I'm afraid she'll have to forgo her delight. I'm sure my health's too delicate to admit of my traipsing half-way to Bath in a stage coach."

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Amelia," said Pallas, when Clara had flounced away. The two still, black figures in the carriage mutely drew their skirts aside to allow its owner to enter.

"I fear," said Amelia Flood coldly, "we're inconveniencing you." She spoke in the offended, distant tone of one who deliberately emphasizes her inferiority. Miss Michal, her hat on one side, rubbing the palms of her hands furtively up and down her thighs, giggled.

"Riding in a coach, riding in a coach!" she chanted in a high thin voice. "Oh dear me, what would Mama say? Three queens—three queens—riding in a coach."

Pallas closed her eyes for a moment. There were times when kindness cost her dear. Miss Michal went on humming shrilly, Miss Amelia did not speak; the carriage began to tug up St. Michael's Hill; her delicate nostrils shrank from the smell of age and poverty the two old ladies had brought into the carriage. It had grown to be a formula—that after the Society's meetings she took Amelia and Michal home to tea. One had to do these little things, besides the big ones; but it sometimes seemed to Pallas that she might, at her time of life, reasonably claim absolution from trivial duties. One had only a limited amount of strength left to see one out. . . .

They went into the graceful drawing-room, whose panelled walls Pallas had recently had repainted eggshell blue. Sometimes she wondered how she found time to love and care for her home. Miss Amelia expressed, by set countenance and the stiffness of an unbending spine, disapproval of her surroundings; she made no move to sit until her hostess beckoned her towards a chair; seated on its edge, her garments fell in black, elegiac folds about her; at any moment, felt Pallas, she was prepared to croak doom from the battlements.

"Sit down, Amelia," she said quietly. "I asked you to come up to-day—an inconvenience to which, as you very well know, I detest putting you: but since you are too proud to receive me in your lodging——"

"I'm not too proud, Pallas." Miss Michal came, like a little girl, to Pallas's side: a little girl dressed up to play the part of an old woman, and exaggerating it, with a child's delight in play-acting. "I often say to Amelia, 'Why don't we have Pallas to take a dish of tea?' It's all very well, Amelia, to make out you are so pious: but pride is a most un-Christian-like vice——"

Pallas hushed her with a pat, that so gratified poor Miss Michal, she smiled and rubbed herself like a kitten against Pallas, who had to stiffen herself to endure the grisly contact.

"I asked you to come up in order that I might profit by your advice."

"Advice!" Amelia grinned incredulously. "I cannot believe my advice would be acceptable to Miss Burmester!"

"Poor devil! How she hates and envies me!" thought Pallas. The hatred of the loveless: what a strange, agonizing, inexplicable thing it was.

"Information, if you prefer the word. Amelia—who, actually, does Triton belong to in these days?"

"Dear me!" Amelia was startled, and showed it. "I am sure I could not tell you that."

"It must still be in the family," frowned Pallas. "Why else should it remain empty and shut up, with all the furniture inside it? It must be in a pitiable condition, after all these years of desertion."

"Oh, yes, it's in the family. So much I do know!"—she bridled—"though Michal and I are treated as though we were completely outsiders, with no claim to know anything whatever about the affairs of our own family! But I can remember Papa's saying it was entailed, so, unless leave has been obtained to break the entail, Triton must still be part of the estate, mustn't it?"

"It doesn't look as though the entail has been broken. I know of half a dozen offers that have been made for its purchase, and apparently nothing has come of them"

"I suppose you're not thinking of buying it, Pallas?" Miss Michal gave her foolish little snigger. "Oh, how nice that would be—if Pallas bought it, and took us to live with her, in our own old home!"

"Hold your tongue, Michal! It was never our home," snapped Amelia; "it was Grandpapa's, and you and I never crossed the threshold more than five times in the whole of our lives."

"I will tell you what I have in my mind," said Pallas slowly. "Ah, here is tea!" she broke off to exclaim, as Pilgrim, who arrogated to herself all the rights of her mistress's personal service, carried the heavy silver tray into the room. "You see, Amelia," she could not refrain from adding, "for all my affluence I don't offer you a spread! My cook is forbidden to serve me toasts or pastries with afternoon tea; but those little scones of oatmeal are very tasty, and one need not feel unpatriotic in enjoying them. Sugar, dear Michal? You know, Amelia," she went on, as she passed the cups of shell-like shallowness towards her guests, "you know that we are at our wits' end to find accommodation for our sick and feeble-minded poor, whose numbers are so much increased by the famine, and who, poor souls, are a menace to the community in which they exist."

"I hear," conceded Amelia, "that there's a scandalous state of affairs in the hospitals: at St. Peter's—six and eight sleeping in a bed!"

"Something must be done about it!" Pallas smote her clenched fist on the arm of her chair. "I've tried in vain to find houseroom for some of the poor creatures, where they can be cared for in some sort of decency; but you know how few houses stand empty in Bristol, and these their owners refuse to sell, or even to rent for the purpose I have in mind."

"Do you want to get Triton? I think that will be very difficult."

"Listen: I don't want the house—I don't think it would be suitable or convenient; but I want permission to convert and use the outbuildings—those enormous stables, that great barn, which was only built a few years before your grandfather died. If I could have the use of those—if only temporarily—only think what an advantage it would be! Think of the pure air of Brandon Hill, in exchange for the stench of the alleys! We could empty St. Peter's of all but its most serious cases, and those accursed cellars where they keep the insane could be sealed up, as they deserve."

"Let me but get the scheme afoot," said Pallas passionately, "and I will guarantee in a few years' time sufficient support to build our own premises."

Whatever be our faults as a city"—she shrugged her shoulders, and her lips twisted ironically—"there is one thing a good Bristolian can never resist: an appeal from an accredited charity, and the satisfaction of seeing his name at the head of a public subscription list!"

"Why not open the list with an appeal for the building you require?"

Pallas shook her head.

"It's not quite so easy as that, Amelia. Most of our wealthy citizens feel they are already supporting as many charities as their means warrant. I've got to get this thing started myself: then trust to civic pride, coupled with the name of Burmester, to prevent its being a failure! I'm prepared to stand the initial outlay, but of course I'll have to ask for subscriptions to carry it on. Now, cannot you tell me, Amelia, where I must apply for this concession?"

As Amelia stubbornly shook her head, Pallas continued to urge her cause.

"Think what your name—the name of Flood—has stood for in this city. You can carry on the tradition, simply by helping me to get the scheme afoot. I promise you you shall have full credit for whatever you do in our interests. Do, do try and use your brains, Amelia! You must have many letters and papers that bear on the disposition of the family property?"

"I'll look in the chest," said Amelia with a curious reluctance. "I don't remember the name of Uncle Jonathan's solicitors, but I know it was a London firm, and, now the estate is out of their hands, I doubt if they will know anything about it."

"Nonsense; records don't disappear in that fashion. If Shergill were alive, he would have handled the matter for me: but I want only to know the name of the person to whom I must apply for authority to convert these empty, useless buildings to the service of our suffering people."

Miss Michal, who had been growing more and more restless during the latter part of the discussion, began to tweak Pallas's skirt.

"Oughtn't we to be going? Oughtn't we to be going?"

"We have trespassed too long on your convenience." Amelia rose, freezing back into her former antagonism.

Miss Michal brought her tiny wrinkled face to Pallas's ear, to whisper:

"You know——? You know——?" She began a long, mysterious pantomime of nods and signs that brought a frown to Amelia's brow.

"She always starts this when she is over-excited. Come, Michal, it is time we were going home."

"You go first!" ordered Michal, nodding her head vigorously. Making her stiff curtsy, Amelia obeyed; she had evidently learned how to manage her sister.

"Now—now——!" whispered Michal, as Amelia's figure went through the open door. "You know, Pallas: you know. My little box!"

When her visitors had gone she pressed her fingers to her aching eyes. Bristol: what had happened to the old, riotous, lavish Bristol of her youth? To the world in which every one had money—certainly sufficient, in many

instances a great deal more than sufficient, to supply their daily needs? To look back on those days was like looking back on an endless ball—the glitter of diamonds in candle-light, the fruity sounds of laughter, the carefree society, the atmosphere of plenty; beyond that dazzling penumbra there was, of course, the other—the tenebrous company of the distressed and needy, of which rumours penetrated occasionally into gay social spheres, to evoke some careless charity; but never to leave behind that cold shaft of dread implanted now by a look in someone's eyes. There were now so many haunted eyes in Bristol faces: faces that had become masks over the inner torment of those who wore them. And the prosperous core of society had shrunk; there was no longer question of ignoring the problems raised by a growing pauper population, and hunger looked at one from the eyes of those whose grandparents' names had headed the lists of Bristol's wealthiest citizens.

There were not only the old Miss Floods; there was Clara Peddy, married to a man who had been ruined in the Lockier-McAulay smash of '93—a whimpering semi-invalid, with two sons disabled by the wars, one earning an insufficient pittance to keep a wife and family in his uncle's office, and two shabby, unmarried daughters, both of whom, to their mother's shame, were obliged to go out and earn their own livings. Until Pallas rescued her, and sent her to Paragon to look after Peregrine's children, Mary Ann was companion to old Miss Totty Shergill, who paid six shillings a week for the privilege of keeping a domestic slave. Flora was governess to the spoilt children of the Sheriff.

There was Susan Culpeper, who had secured her red-haired offshoot of the house of Gannet, only to be left a widow within twelve months of the marriage, bullied and driven by her stepmother-in-law, and kept in continual reminder of her dependency. The Cruikshanks, both of them, were dead, and had not "cut up" for nearly as much as Bristol expected; their widows lived in a small, anxious way, hampered by the name of which they had once been proud. At least a dozen families Pallas knew intimately had fallen victims to the building craze, and of that dashing circle which had once revolved about Miss Burmester not more than a handful remained. Nearly all—the fact was only too painfully evident—were seriously affected by the almost total cessation of the slave trade, and those who were not hung on to their money and pleaded poverty, in order to avoid being plundered by their unluckier companions. Few dared openly to execrate her, for Abolition was the fashion; but Pallas knew that she must be the best-hated woman in Bristol.

"Put on your hat, Pilgrim; we will take a stroll before it is dark."

The woman who bent over the discarded tea equipage appeared, with her back to the window, to be handsome: tall, with a fine figure and beautiful, smooth hair of a pale, sandy colour, which swept in thick folds partly concealed by her cap. But when she turned, and the light fell on her features, they were seen to be terribly ravaged by disease. Fanny Pilgrim had nursed her mistress through smallpox, only to fall victim to it herself. No one save Pallas suspected that she was sensitive to her appearance; the grey, pitted skin held back its secret like a thick veil, and few people read into the dull, grey eyes the pain she felt when indelicate people stared curiously at her.

The two women struck out by the footpaths that led past the Royal Fort across the parks; the thin winter grass was crisp beneath their feet. The tall figure of Miss Burmester was familiar on those heights; the fine, flat back, the proudly reared head were the same, only those who had known her intimately since girlhood might observe that the step was a little shorter, the curve of the bosom fainter, and the use of the walking-stick no fashionable affectation; but Pilgrim knew better than offer her arm to her mistress—not even for that final tug up the slopes of Brandon Hill. If she noticed an increasing tendency, on Miss Burmester's part, to pause in admiration of the matchless view, she knew better than to comment on it.

"If I were a little younger, Pilgrim, I'd give up the house and come and live this side of Bristol." She spoke carefully, controlling the breathlessness that annoyed her.

"They've ruined your view, miss," said Pilgrim resentfully. She had taken the building over Kingsdown as a personal affront; now that the gaunt shells of unfinished houses alone bore witness to the defeated ambitions of their designers, she regarded them as evidence of the just wrath of the Almighty at the despoilment of one of His loveliest works.

"It's been ruined for nearly ten years; I'm used to it by now."

The sky was thick with winter twilight as they passed by the moss-grown pillars, on which the stone sea-monsters curled. They stood knee-deep in sour, yellow stubble, looking up at the blind façade of the deserted house.

"You would not believe, Fanny, what a beautiful place this was—once."

Miss Burmester rarely called her maid by her Christian name. It was the latter who had insisted upon the cessation of the more friendly "Fanny," and, at her own request, became "Pilgrim." "Her ladyship's maid is called Sparkes, and only low-class folk call their servants by their Christian names. I like to feel I'm in service with the gentry."

"'Tis a pity to see these grand old places falling into rack and ruin," she observed.

"Come," said Pallas sharply. "We'll get rheumatism, standing here in the damp grass."

She led the way quickly, round by the side of the house, skirting the little, half-moon balustrade of "The Peep," from which part of the stonework had fallen, leaving a melancholy gap, through which was visible the scum-coated pit which had been the lily pond. The trees had grown up; no longer could Hercules have gazed from his eyrie upon his beloved rivers. A thick tangle of boughs left visible no more than a glint of silver; a colony of rooks had established themselves in the upper branches and the nests made dark patches like darns among the delicate fabric of the twigs. Pilgrim shivered.

"It 'ud take a fortune, wouldn't it, miss, to set this place in order?"

Pallas nodded; her mind was full of other things.

"Folks is saying, miss, that the house is haunted," ventured Pilgrim nervously. "There was a cockfight, wasn't there, miss, and an old man died? Tom-ploughman says there's some rare outlandish noises comes out of the place after dark!"

"And what's Tom-ploughman doing here after dark? I suppose he's getting some silly girl into trouble."

Pilgrim pursed her lips; she considered such remarks unbecoming to their mutual virginity.

"It gives me the creeps to see trees growing so close up to a house."

"We'll have no time for the creeps," said Pallas tersely, "if my plans come off. Look at that barn; it's in perfect condition. We could house at least fifty in there; and the coach-house will take another ten, with the stables at hand to be used as kitchens and refectories."

"What will you do with the old carriages, ma'ain? Tt-tt—to think of the moth there must be in them cushions!" Pilgrim's nose was flattened against the grimed panes of a window; having dimly made out the great, mammoth-like form of Hercules' travelling coach, she withdrew it with another shiver. "I never in my life saw so likely a place for ghosts!"

"Ghosts?" said Pallas vaguely. Only she could have spoken of the ghosts that inhabited Triton Lodge: the ghost, among others, of her dear, dead love. Behind one of those shuttered windows—she had turned towards the house—she and her love might have lain entwined; the ivy which had crawled all over the grey stonework, and clotted window and porch, was a curtain let down on a stage set for a drama whose final scene had never been enacted. Stage, scenery and furnishings waited for a vanished hero, while she, the heroine, felt the fard turning to dust on her cheeks, the feathers mouldering, the costume fading into antiquity as she waited her call. Kind people, the play is ended: ring down the curtain. What? You are dissatisfied, sir, that there is no final act? The management regrets. . . . Put out the candles; lock up the greenroom. Ladies and gentlemen, the players have gone home. . . .

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CHAPTER IV

I

THE prisoners were trailed through the town, and, apathetic as Bristol had grown to such spectacles, rumour drove customers away from the stalls, and shopkeepers to their doorways, to observe their passing.

"'Tis the French prize crew as took the Barbary brig, and fell into our hands as she was passing Ushant."

A mumble of satisfaction went through the crowds; the capture of French prisoners had become a commonplace, but the seizure of a prize crew, at the height of its triumph, and within so close range of escape, appealed even to the most phlegmatic.

"They's Crappos, is they?"

"They's all sorts, mates; look'ee—them's black heathens from North Africa!"

The question swelled, as the joyless procession went on:

"Where's the mad fellow? Where's the madman? We want to see the madman!"

Accosted by an acquaintance among the crowds, one of the escort laughed.

"Ain't no room for madmen in Fishponds, mum! We's clapped blinkers on him and sent him to the Old Mint!"

"God save the poor worm!" breathed the one who had asked the question. Life in Fishponds Military Jail might be far from luxurious; it was paradise compared to the accommodation which St. Peter's Hospital—known as frequently to Bristolians as the Old Mint—prepared for its lodgers.

The news went through the town that Fishponds had succeeded in disposing of its ambiguous guest to St. Peter's, on the grounds that the adequate guard of some six hundred French, Dutch and Portuguese prisoners left no provision for the charge of lunatics.

St. Peter's made no heavy weather of its pauper lunatics; in a dungeon half below ground level, running with damp, ankle-deep in human excrement and swarming with the big river-rats that came up from the waterfront and dropped through the gratings that gave the inmates their solitary glimpse of daylight, and of a world that most of them had forgotten, they were left to warders whose interest in their charges was confined to the latter's ability to pay, in cash or in kind, for such attentions as their guardian thought fit to bestow on them. A coat, a pair of breeches: the poor imbecile was easily persuaded that he had no use for such conventional trappings inside St. Peter's Hospital. Long-haired, unshaven, many of them had nothing but the natural growth of their bodies to cover their nakedness; chains and shackles were used to prevent the more dangerous from injuring their companions, and dread of their warders kept the rest in order, as a kennel of dogs is kept in order by fear of the keeper's lash.

It may be taken for granted that none of the hospital governors, none of the philanthropic public who subscribed to the upkeep of St. Peter's charity

penetrated to the noisome cavern that housed the nameless company of the worse-than-dead. For them St. Peter's was the fine Renaissance façade, the splendid courtroom with its lavishly carved fireplace and ceiling, perhaps a glimpse of the yard—known to its habitués as "Purgatory"—in which stocks and a whipping-post advertised the tendency of the Corporation to usurp magisterial power over the vagrant poor whom its officers so sedulously sought out. Somewhere behind this excellent façade lay the sick and dying, casually surveyed from time to time by surgeons whose services, being unpaid, were not to be commanded; equally casually fed by a "mistress of the kitchen," whose lack of zeal may have had something to do with her salary of five or six pounds a year.

And it was here he found himself, when they unbound his eyes: those eyes which had looked upon so many horrors that they found no cause for flinching in the surroundings that gradually defined themselves as he passed from blindness into vision. It was here that he stood, the ragged blanket still held about his hips with its cord that was someone's contribution to public propriety.

They came and touched him, in the semi-darkness—his companions in this hell of which he already knew so many and such various aspects! And the first thought that came to him, of these faces which surrounded him, was that they were white! At least, they were intended to be white; beneath the grime and the hairy growth of years was the pallor that belonged to the white races.

With caution he stretched himself; his spine, which for weeks had accommodated itself to the low-roofed, floating jail in which he and his fellow-prisoners had been confined, returned creaking to its original posture. He lifted his arms—those wasted members whose bunches of knotted sinew alone remained to testify to former strength—and reached towards a ceiling that he could feel, rather than see; and he felt a cracking in those compressed regions of his ribs that made a cage about his heavily thudding heart. He found himself near a wall, and measured himself against it; a dirty, grey light streamed down from overhead, and he saw, with a kind of strangeness, a sense of wonder, his own body, thin sack of scarred leather dragged over bones which thrust themselves like cutting edges against their discoloured covering: and the grizzled bush of his own beard, and feet, broad and bare, that flattened the filth in which he was standing.

And meanwhile the faces came and went, he was lapped by the waves of curiosity, which subsided, revived and subsided again.

By nightfall he had learned to know his companions; the harmless, foolish ones who came and went in a parody of liberty which ended with the four walls of the cell, and the seven or eight unfortunates who alternately raged and lapsed into silent lethargy in their bondage of chains and strips of canvas against the walls. And by that time he knew also that, by fault of his own weakness and imprudence, he had been listed as a madman, and that any exaggerated action, any indiscreet attempt to convince the powers that governed his present state, would operate only to his disadvantage.

He knew he was not mad, but he knew, as he had known these many weeks, that madness was not very far away; and as he turned over the confused contents of his treacherous memory, which continued to hold back the solitary item which might prove a clue to it all, he prayed God for patience; without

patience, he knew, nothing could be accomplished. Human patience, and the grace of God. *All men, if they have doubted much or sinned much, come to the Cross in the end.* Ay; but who said it? Could there be time, in whatever of life remained to him, to sort out the component parts of the enigma which was himself?—the shapes that, fitted together, would surely give the answer to the puzzle? Supposing that some of the shapes were lost for ever? Terror seized him whenever he thought of this possibility, and he prayed aloud, passionately, in whichever of three or four languages came most instantly to his mind.

There was some sunlight, shelter from the wind, and a certain amount of come-and-go in "Purgatory" which relieved the tedium of sitting in the stocks. China Ben, who occupied this unenviable position as sequel to a lively night at the Red Lion in Wind Street, sat there with great philosophy, staring up at the small, grated windows of the erstwhile Old Mint. They said forty millions of money had been minted there once upon a time. Forty millions of golden English guineas. China Ben did not even trouble to imagine it; one might as well say forty million pebbles, forty million gnats. In China Ben's circle they did not deal in forty millions of anything—except, maybe, of lice. He wriggled his shoulder-blades; it was hellish, not being able to scratch, or even to wipe the drip away from one's nose.

An irregular dull thudding from the basements told him that his unluckier companions were beating hemp. China Ben had escaped that, thanks to a tumble from the top-gallants in '78 or '9; he had only one arm, and that an unreliable one. There was a thin, continuous wailing from the hospital wards on the first floor, punctuated by the howls of a woman in childbirth. And just at the foot of the wall, close to Ben's dirty coat-tails, was the grating of one of the cells for the lunatics.

A pauper came out, carrying a pail of slops, which she tilted into the river. She came shuffling back, rubbing her face and neck, which were fiery with the King's Evil; one of her eyes was flattened, milky, like a blob of jelly in its discoloured socket.

"Fine day for Jan'ery!" offered China Ben.

"Eh?"

"Business good, ma'am?" inquired China Ben.

She sniggered, and showed a scrofulous hand, wet, with a pinky stain.

"A fine boy! And his mudder was a doll-mop an' his fadder a church stepple!"

"What do they pay the night watch here, gammer?"

"Ninepence an' beer."

"An' belly-timber besides?"

"You got to buy your food." She coughed and spat. China Ben wagged a reproachful head; their worships the Corporation were not generous. "They pays better," she volunteered, "for de madhouse."

"How much?"

"I've heard tell two shillings; I'd not be sure."

Two shillings; it was worth consideration. The post of night watchman was recruited daily from among the submerged population to which China Ben belonged; it entailed, in addition to doorkeeping, the care of the patients themselves—which amounted to little more than a cursory stroll through the

wards or cells, in the course of which, for a consideration, a fever-stricken patient might be indulged with a pitcher of water, or one troublesome with delirium clouted into oblivion for the convenience of his neighbours and guardian. Caring for the lunatics was tougher—but two shillings would buy a lot of beer. China Ben wriggled his shoulder-blades and resolved to have words with his friend the turnkey.

"Soy ingles, señores; no entiendo mucho de su idioma. Lo hablo un pocito. . . . Madre de dios, no conosco esta gente! A mi casa vienen todos, pero. . . ."

China Ben winked; that would be the Mad Portugee, talking his gibberish, poor worm! China Ben sniffed the fresh air, and congratulated himself on being in the stocks; it was surely healthier than the dungeons down there.

"Speak English," said the voice, so close beside him that China Ben was startled. "I—speak—English. I forget—but it all comes back. English. I remember the sound of it: the shape and taste of it in my mouth. Not thick and dark, but light—light and fresh, like water. . . ."

"God's teeth!" said China Ben. "What's that?"

One of the loungers that hung about the gates of "Purgatory," in the hopes of earning a few coppers by executing commissions for its inmates, sidled towards him.

"Fetch us a pot o' beer, mate!"

"Got any money?"

China Ben swore broadly. The youth tittered.

"I'll have some to-night."

"How's that?"

"They're loosing me at sundown."

"Water?" said the voice. "I keep on telling you I can't drink water. They spat in my drinking water. God, let their tongues rot and their spittle turn to poison for spitting in my water. Their spittle made poison of my water; the poison went up into my head, into the cave of bone where a man keeps his brain. I forgot—I forget—everything—except that they spat. . . ."

The January afternoon was closing in with thin, cold, river-mist that blotted out the uncertain sun and stole uneasily through the meagre coverings of China Ben's body. Was nobody good for a pint of beer to warm a poor fellow sitting in the stocks? January was no sort of month to set a fellow in the stocks.

"I got cramps in the stomach something shocking, Charlie."

"Ay—I dare say," was the unpromising reply given by the stockily-built fellow with a black stubble all over a prizefighter's jowl, who, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, had just issued forth from the lodge.

"They say beer's the only thing for stomach cramps." As no offer was forthcoming, China Ben took the bull by the horns. "Stand me a beer, Charlie, and I'll pay you to-night. Straight I will—genui-wine oil of Argentum, or call me a quamino! Come on now—you ain't got anybody yet, have you, to take the night watch, Charlie boy?"

Charlie was doubtful.

"Maybe they haven't, at the hospital."

"For ninepence?" China Ben was scornful. "Ninepence ain't the price o' my night's rest, cully." The jerk of his head drew the turnkey, albeit reluc-

tantly, closer to his side: but, mindful of his living, the black-jowled man cocked a wary eye at the upper windows. It didn't do for St. Peter's officers to be seen in intimate conversation with occupants of the stocks. "Give's a chance, mate: t'ain't often you got the chance of obliging an old pal! Two bob, an' I'll put the fear o' hell into that crew o' yours, between dark an' daylight, and you're free to please the ladies as must be pining their pretty hearts away for the sight o' that ravishin' countenance o' yours!"

The turnkey smirked and rubbed his jaw.

"What's this son of a gun," went on China Ben, "that keeps on about somebody a-spitting in his drinking water? Seems like it's got on his mind!"

"Who's been telling you that?" The other turned suspicious.

"My own ears, if you want to know." China Ben jerked his head towards the grating.

"Ay. They calls him a furriner, but he talks English as good as you or me. 'Tis a matter the 'thorities ought to look after; we ain't got 'commodation here for prisoners o' war, nor proper supervision." Charlie puffed out lips and belly with the indignation of one who knows he is being wrongfully treated. "If I got to look after prisoners o' war, I says, I wants more pay for it."

"Sure, that is but fair," said China Ben with sympathy. "And seeing how you got your hands full already, you'd be grateful, wouldn't you, Charlie boy, of a friend to stand by o' nights?"

The insinuating tone, the wink, were lost on the other, who passed his tongue suggestively across his lips before turning, with the portentous roll of officialdom, towards the lodge. Self-importance, however, obliged him to call once more upon his crestfallen listener.

"You mark my words!" He shook a dirty forefinger at China Ben. "This fella's fakin' mad, for reasons of his own: and, if you ask me, 'tis one o' Bonyparty's spies that's got hisself took prisoner in pursoot of 'is own business."

China Ben was alone again.

"The dirty, curmudgeonly sod! The scrat-penny oliver, as 'ud see a poor puttock perish o' thirst afore he'd spare a sup of ale to wet his whistle!"

"Take care—don't touch the water! They've been spitting in it!" came the hoarse, urgent whisper, close to Ben's coat-tails. Goaded, China Ben launched a stream of saliva at the grating by way of reply.

"To hell with you and your water! What have you got to grumble about? The wind ain't blowing down there, is it?—and yer arse ain't turned to block-ice with sitting on a stone slab since daylight come? Then choke yer luff!"

There followed a short, doubtful silence: when the voice came again it was so near that the speaker's lips must have been pressed against the grating.

"Hark—friend. What's this place?"

China Ben broke into a bitter guffaw.

"You're sure enough crazy, bucko, ain't you? To think o' you not knowin' 'Is Royal 'Ighness's splendidous premises! Ain't you marked the red velvet on the walls, an' the gold plate they served you for your dinner? Maybe 'Er Grace the Princess 'asn't called on you yet? Better dandy yourself up, mate, and get ready to receive the Royal party as it comes a-marching down the stairs."

"Blast your soul to hell!" came the searing whisper. "Tell me where I am!"

It was, after all, too cold, too wretched, for further witticisms, and China Ben's ears were pricked for the chime that signalled his freedom. Dusk stole quickly over the red roofs of Bristol, and the Old Mint was not so far from the lodging of an old shipmate, called Bowling, who would surely be good for a copper or two.

"You're in the Old Mint, bucko—if that means aught to you; you're one of the honoured guests of the Bristol Corporation!"

"Bristol? Bristol?" The voice repeated it doubtfully, parrotwise. Then, as the sweet five o'clock chimes sounded across the darkling river, and China Ben's heart leapt up, there rose a cry that roared round "Purgatory" and rang back from the high walls:

"Shergill! Shergill! Shergill!"

II

"What is it, Orry? I can't believe that any one so sensible as you is worrying herself sick over Beaufort."

"Beaufort!" Orabella snorted. "I've given up worrying about that. Beaufort can give me a Spanish daughter-in-law with whom I can't exchange a word of conversation; he can give me Roman Catholic grandchildren—what do these things matter? They're only part of the afflictions one's children bring on one. Peregrine dies; William chooses to inflict a little, vulgar rattle-pate on me; Beaufort goes to foreign parts for a wife—I can't feel any more about them. But when Lionel—when Lionel——!"

"Come, Orry; whatever your other children have done to disappoint you, you can't find fault with Lionel. He is devoted to you. There is nothing in the world he would not do for you."

Orabella whisked a tear from her eye.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Pallas. I can't tell you. Things are different. He has utterly changed."

"I can't believe that. It's only a week or so since he was talking to me about you with the most loving anxiety."

"Really? Do you mean that?" The rainbow of Orabella's smile glittered through her tears.

"Of course I do; why should I make a story about it?"

"But his horrible painting! Every day, every week, it seems to absorb more of him. I hardly see him except in the evenings, and then he seems so distant, so abstracted, I can hardly bear to be with him." She clenched her hands. "Pally, I've lost my other sons. I will not have Lionel taken from me!"

"There is no question of it," Pallas assured her. "Orry"—she laughed a little, trying to rally her—"I don't believe you understand what a rare creature you've got in Lionel! I hear Mr. Bird is chattering about his genius all over the town."

"What does he know about it—a creature whom no one has ever heard of, who actually inhabits a wretched hovel down on the waterfront! To be a painter it is surely not necessary to be squalid—none of the painters I have met have found it so!" scornfully retorted Orabella. "Mr. Gainsborough, Mr. Sherwin—I'm sure they're most elegant and gentlemanly: Mr. Sherwin

particularly, in those odd red coats of his—bohemian, of course, but quite *comme-il-faut*—and I'm sure they cost a pretty penny! As for genius—I don't want a genius for my son! I want——”

“I know what you want,” Pallas said quietly. “You want the little curly-headed boy that Lionel used to be: to put his arms round your neck and sit on your knee—ah. Oorry! All mothers feel like you do at some time or other; but it's no use, my dear, it's no use. Lionel is a man, with a man's career before him; you would not grudge him his future success?”

“It's all very well for you to be so reasonable; you don't happen to be his mother.”

“I sometimes feel as if I were,” she said, and paused. She would not wound Orabella by commenting on the fact that she understood Lionel better than his own parents, and yet she knew it was true; that Lionel knew it, as well as herself, and that they agreed tacitly to ignore it. But she knew that when Lionel brought his problems and his enthusiasms to her—to her, who knew less than nothing of painting!—her love for him gave her a power of understanding which was denied to Orabella, and, knowing it, her heart ached for her sister. Perhaps, after all, it was good to have no children. . . .

Supposing—the thought shot unbidden into her mind—Lionel should wish to marry? God help him and the girl of his choice. Orabella's autumn beauty had become a little vixenish of late; hers was the anxious, petulant expression of the woman who snatches at her vanishing charm, and demands constant reassurance from the tributes of those she loves. She was not content with her husband's adoration; she demanded it also from her children, and these, all save Lionel, had failed her, in transferring their loves to other objects. All save Lionel? Poor Orabella; it seemed as though she was beginning to suspect that Lionel, with his exigent, immaterial mistress, was more lost to her than Peregrine, whom death had snatched away, William with his Caroline and Beaufort with his shadowy Spaniard. And the more she suspected, the more she would fight—against the unconquerable.

“Come, Oorry,” she said resolutely, “let's not upset ourselves over fancies. Lionel loves you dearly, and as he is going to be a famous painter one day, you will have to make the best of it. How proud you'll be—oh, yes, you'll be quite intolerable!—when your portrait stands finished on his easel and all society flocks to see it! Now I must leave you to entertain yourself for a little while, as it is time I went over to Triton.”

“To think you might have been mistress of Triton,” wailed Orabella, reviving another grievance, “instead of wearing yourself to the bone for the sake of a lot of paupers who are the most ungrateful creatures in the world!”

“We don't work for gratitude,” said Pallas shortly; she rose and signalled to Pilgrim, who had entered the room with her hat and pelisse. “Have the beds arrived?”

“They're just putting them up, and the place is as clean as a new pin with all that whitewash,” said Pilgrim with satisfaction; it gave her pleasure to ignore Lady Edward, whom she disliked. “It's just as well you're going over, miss; there's some funny goings-on at Triton to-day.”

“What do you mean?”

“Two fellows that gave us queer looks and watched what we was doing in the stables for a while.”

"Did they speak to you?"

"No; they mumbled to each other a bit, then they went back—into the house—again."

"Into the house?" Her heart gave a tick. "After all," she muttered, "I offered to pay rent; they must either accept it, and leave us alone, or they must find us other quarters. Don't worry," she added, as she saw an anxious look on her servant's face. "We're not going to be defeated, Pilgrim, at this time of day!"

"You know your own business, I suppose, Pally," put in Orabella, "but I must say it all sounds very illegal; I hope you aren't going to get into trouble over it."

"If I do, you can be sure I'll get myself out. I've got the English and Spanish lawyers arguing till they're too busy to keep track of my activities: my own head's spinning and poor Clay's taken to his bed with nervous prostration. Men, I discover," said Miss Burmester sedately, "are terribly helpless face to face with female determination! Now we've got to make our plans and act quickly; they won't find it easy to evict us if we're already established."

"What, exactly, are you proposing to do?" sniffed Lady Edward, disapproving of the intimate glance which passed between Pallas and Pilgrim.

"I have to arrange for the immediate transport of fifty convalescent and non-infectious cases from St. Peter's," Pallas told her. "Later on there may be more, but fifty's as many as we can manage for the present. Their removal will leave proper room for the ones suffering from fevers and the pox, and should do away with the use of those infernal dungeons which are nearly under the river."

Orabella gave a shiver; why had Pallas invariably to bring up these disgusting subjects?

"I suppose you know what you're doing," she contented herself with saying. "You seem to have very large ideas!"

Pallas considered before replying gravely:

"Yes. We're going to be desperately in need of funds, too, unless somebody comes forward to help us; the money isn't going as far as it should."

"Now don't say you're going to plague me for shillings, like you were always doing for your hateful slave trade!"

Pallas laughed.

"I'd have no compunction in plaguing you again if you were in a position to help me! But Edward has been very generous—and, among the many rich people she knows, I hope Rory may find some who would contribute to our scheme, if they were made to understand its importance."

"What is its importance? No one ever made such a fuss over paupers when I was young, and I'm sure the world was a much pleasanter and livelier place."

"You're a little hypocrite." Pallas took her sister's plump chin between thumb and forefinger. "And you are just pretending to be selfish and hard-hearted; you needn't imagine that either of us is taken in."

"Of course I'm soft-hearted enough about our own poor—the people we know, who are decent and respectful and well behaved. I gave away enough blankets and soup last winter to keep an army," declared Orabella, "and I

THE SUN IS MY UNDOING

must say their gratitude was most pretty and touching! But as for the Bristol riff-raff——”

“The Bristol riff-raff are what we have helped to make them. I can't stop to discuss that with you, my dear; besides, I've done it often enough before. But you will at least understand that to a nation depleted as ours is by wars every human creature is of value, and it isn't merely our duty, but to our national interest, to build up a healthy people to replace those who are gone.”

CHAPTER V

I

THE chains had broken the flesh on his wrists and ankles and there were big purple areas of contusion where, he supposed, he had bruised himself in struggling against his captivity. He knew he was verminous, and tried to assuage the constant itch by scraping himself against the rough walls, so there were raw patches between his shoulders. But he clung to the bars of the grid in his moments of lucidity, and continued to give entertainment to the casual visitors in Purgatory. Sometimes he had quite a little audience; he could not see them, but he could hear the scraping of their feet, their muttering and sniggering, somewhere above his head.

"In the name of God, and the blessed Virgin, and the holy angels, it has got to be ended! Yes, yes, by the wounds of Christ, you must put a stop to it! Put a stop to it, for the sake of the Cross. The Cross, my friends—don't you see we have all got to get to it?—and how can we, with *them* holding us back? They clutch us—don't you feel them? Dragging on our loins, our knees, our ankles; it is their weight—the weight of their pangs and passions—holds us back from salvation. Let me out of here, friends—let me out, and I'll tell you all about it! Hark ye; don't think about your pockets"—ironic laughter greeted this exhortation—"only get me out, friends; I'll see you're not the losers by it. There's other ways of making your fortunes, outside of slaving. I'll show you: I'll show you with these hands of mine—ay, they were hands before slavery turned 'em into claws . . ."

His listeners wagged their heads, spat and turned away. Slavery was *vieux jeu* to most of them.

Twice a day they fed him with sour food in a pan; he scraped the pan clean, he had eaten worse; but to drink was torment. He could not look at the dark, scummy water without a convulsion of the stomach; thirst drove him to put his lips to it, but he retched up most of what he swallowed. The Moorish guards had acted barbarously with the vessels in which the water was brought from the well; water was polluted for ever by the memory of their conduct.

Of his disgusting surroundings he took no notice; they were a commonplace, a mere extension of the rat-ridden Moroccan lodging in which he and his fellow-prisoners had been housed; on whose filth they laid their bodies down after their labours in the Emperor's gardens; in whose darkness they fought and squabbled over a blanqueen's-worth of raw meat.

Sometimes he heard strange noises: groans, barks, unintelligible sounds, and knew they came from himself. At such times he felt as though he had shrunk to a shred, an ort, an insect inside himself; that his material captivity was only the faint, shadowy symbol of that deeper imprisonment of himself inside himself. *O Lord of Deliverance, in Whose hands lie the freedom and captivity of every human soul, deliver me from the prison of myself. Set me free, O God, from my darkness, reveal unto me the source of light, that I may serve Thee in humbleness all the rest of my life.*

Sometimes, struggling towards lucidity, he realized that he himself was responsible for this state of affairs. He remembered clinging to the grid like a madman, and crying out some words; then, when They came into the cell behind him, instead of speaking clearly, of explaining himself, as he should have done, the blackness again descended on him, blotting out the new-shaped thought, and in his desperation he threw himself on Them, to do Them an injury. How many people had he injured—perhaps killed—since the moment when memory began, and when, apparently, it ended?

There was the Moor he had strangled, on a night when the guards were drunk: and stole his knife and sword before slipping into the streets which were patched with moonlight. And the French-speaking sailor who had tried to sell him to one of the palace servants; the knife had saved that situation, and cut him his way down to the souks. . . .

Groaning, shaking his head from side to side, rolling it on his shoulders, as though by doing so he could co-ordinate the splinters of memory, he tried to recall the words, the magic words that had brought people to him: people who came to stare, to mutter and curse him. They might do more, those words, if he could but recall them.

Sometimes he suffered from fevers; his jaw chattered with cold, or he felt as though he was being rubbed with handfuls of burning sand. Each grain was a separate pinpoint of fire. His body filled with gases, he ran weak with flux. The cell was never cleaned.

He was blind for days on end; then a thousand whirling suns swung in darkness round him. He was alone in a glittering expanse of sand, white as silver, with a staring blue sky clamped over it and a leaden ache in his jaw that ran round behind and down the muscles of his neck; then he and a score of others heaved on great blocks of stone and timber, and the sweat ran down their faces and over their cracked lips. . . . There was the taste of blood and sweat in his mouth when he woke from this dream. In another, millions of ants were running over him; through the dazzle of their minute reddish-brown bodies he saw the whiteness of his bones, picked bare by small, savage jaws; he found himself yelling, and someone beating him about the head.

He swam in deep water until he was exhausted, followed by the monster-shapes of fish, some of which had human faces; when they swam over his head he saw they had translucent bellies, through which he could see dark, naked, human forms, writhing in suffocation among the fishes' entrails; and he rode through flames in a coach, with a dead girl across his knees. He walked in shameful nakedness through an elaborately dressed company, all of whom, to his relief, had their backs turned towards him; but when he thought to make his escape unseen they turned quickly, and their faces, coal-black, were filled with loathing and mockery. In the silence, which seemed to mark their horror, there was the noise of a child wailing, and it woke him.

The effect of such dreams, after a while, was to rob him of all vitality, and this loss of vitality, of which he was conscious, troubled him since it reduced his hopes of impressing himself on those who now had charge of him.

The place he was in was no larger than a cupboard, for they had moved him; he was too disturbing an influence among the other lunatics. To lie full length he had to get crosswise of his cell, and when he stood up he had

to remember to keep his head a little down. Such light as there was entered by a long, evil-smelling shaft; other things came down as well, for the shaft was a continuation of one of the town sewers. Sometimes he was ankle-deep in water and his limbs were racked with rheumatic cramps; but he was alone, and gradually, as the miracle of solitude was borne in on him, his brain regained some measure of equilibrium. Or rather, of tranquillity. In the absence of other humans, the strain of attempted co-ordination was relaxed, the present ebbed, the past flowed quietly through the caverns of memory.

It was otherwise on those occasions when the turnkeys made beer-money out of exhibiting him to sensation-hunters who happened to have the price of a drink in their pockets, as "The Devil-Man from Corsica." The tale of the mad Buonaparte-ish spy was all over Bristol; on Sundays and holidays his keepers could afford to get roaring drunk on the proceeds of their exhibit. For them it was fortunate Bristol stomachs were not squeamish; a few of the bolder ribs would even descend half-way into the reeking cell, for the sake of boasting they had been within arm's length of the lunatic who was described as having, in one of his furies, ripped the windpipe out of a fellow-imbecile.

But on such occasions something warned him to keep very quiet. Crouched on his haunches, his head sunk between his shoulders, and his elbows planted on his separated knees, he brought all his available faculties to the art of listening. Among the indecent chaff, the bawdy commentaries that invariably acclaimed his naked state, there must surely be, one day, some phrase, some name, that would unlock the gates of memory.

But the names that were spoken in those days were not the names that were known in Bristol of forty years ago; any more than there was, in this victim of Bristol charity, anything to recall the half-forgotten legends of the vanished master of Triton Lodge.

Save me, dear God, from myself. Save me, for the love of Jcsus, from myself. Set me free from this shell, this husk, this crust. Destroy me. It was all, all wrong: the way I thought, the things I knew. Wrong. The power and the glory—wrong. For Thy tides and Thy billows, O God, are stronger than the strongest works of man, and Thy wrath rideth the tempest. For Thine own ends Thou shalt put power into the hands of devils, and the children of light shall be cast into darkness. Break down my darkness that I may serve Thee. . . .

II

"As one responsible for public safety, I resist the proposition with all my heart and soul!" said Richard Peddy—naming two things which he did not possess. His pompous glance challenged the assembly; who was there that would dare to oppose a Peddy?

He was aware there was Miss Burmester; aware that it was she who had split the last meeting, defeating him by a single vote—secured under intimidation, of course! He had not been there, but he could imagine the blue flare of the Burmester eye, and the crumbling of Walter Fripp, as reported by his

sycophants. He sneered his thankfulness that he had never allowed any woman to make a fool of him.

"Ladies and gentlemen! There has been enough unconstitutional procedure in connection with our administration of St. Peter's; I move it shall stop, here and now, unequivocally. Do you wish us to be a scandal and a laughing-stock throughout Bristol? I at least will not give my sanction to any further contraventions of established order, or lend my ear to so-called reforms, which, in point of fact, I regard as reflections on the manner in which our institution has heretofore been administered."

There was a faint sycophantish murmur from his end of the table.

"It is intended as such."

The interpolation startled the company. Simon Cruikshank's elderly, horse-faced widow, bitterly jealous of Pallas's authority, bridled; she threw a warning glance in her cousin's direction; it would not be her fault if he weakened! Really, it was outrageous, the way in which that old maid led them by the nose! She rustled, prepared to voice her support of the other faction.

"The less said the better about administration, Mr. Chairman!" Pallas was saying calmly. "One only hopes that by the relief of our abominable congestion, matters will improve in the future. I am here to propose, nay, to insist, ladies and gentlemen, in despite of our Chairman's warning, that the underground cells in which we have been housing our imbecile paupers shall from this day be utterly condemned; that they shall be sealed up, and their occupants transferred to proper lodgings on the first floor, much of which is vacant through the removal of the non-infectious cases."

"Really, ma'am! Are you proposing that these dangerous savages be allowed to roam about among the helpless sick? I do protest——!"

"Save your protestations, ma'am. Mr. Chairman, I've made it my business to procure a plan of the building." As Peddy started, she smiled dryly. "I was obliged to do this, since, by someone's orders—perhaps your own—I was refused access to all but a room or two, in the female quarters——"

"And very properly," grunted Peddy, supported by energetic nods from Mrs. Cruikshank.

"We won't discuss propriety; it's a subject on which, as the Sheriff can tell you, I hold strong views!" The wretched Fripp winced and turned his head away, cursing his misfortune that he seemed fated always to sit on committees with Pallas Burmester, and, God help him, he'd have married her in his hot-headed youth, if he'd had his own way! He gave a small, self-congratulatory snort, which brought her bright ironic glance to rest on him briefly, as though she read his thoughts. "Are the grapes," asked her eyes, "so very sour? I was obliged to assure myself," she went on, "that my demands were in reason."

"Pardon me," interrupted another member of the Board, a small, wizened half-cousin to the Canynges. "Does it not appear to you, ma'am, that you have already demanded enough? There is already a large, critical faction which, while granting the goodness of your motives, deprecates your fashion of putting them into practice."

"Don't trouble me with factions, sir. As for deprecation, I'm used to it. I don't hold with half-hearted reforms, Mr. Chairman, and if I take pains

to relieve you of a large number of your charges, it's not to save the Corporation money or the hospital attendants hard work! I should have thought so much was plain. The plans show me three rooms, two large and one small, which are cut off from the main building by a passage and double doors; in these it will be a simple matter to isolate the lunatic patients so that they shall not interfere with their neighbours——"

"Now, my dear ma'am!" Peddy's lips curled into a smile, as he leaned forward, certain of his ground. "I know the apartments you mean." He and his supporters exchanged triumphant glances. "Yes, yes, very good rooms indeed—on paper! But paper doesn't show one everything, hey?"

Mrs. Cruikshank sniggered.

"Roofing's gone," mumbled Walter Fripp, "a couple of winters ago."

"It can be repaired, I suppose?" snapped Pallas.

"Who's to pay for it?"

"Who but the Corporation?"

"Now, now, you mustn't talk as if we were millionaires," reproved Peddy, good-tempered now he had made his point.

"We can raise an annual rate of two thousand four hundred pounds for the New Cut," pointed out Pallas, "from which a minority profit, while the vast majority pay out sixpence in the pound without gaining a penny advantage. Another halfpenny on the Poor Rate, and you'd have enough to roof the whole of St. Peter's, without putting your hands in your pockets."

An irritable shrug ran round the company: angry glances said they had had enough of this female vapouring. She felt in their glances a bitterness of personal antagonism, and reflected, not for the first time, that she must be the best hated woman in Bristol.

She was worried—much more so than she admitted—about the financial aspect of her scheme for establishing the hospital annexe at Triton; she had failed to gain from the Corporation so much as a penny's grant towards the expenses; they took shelter behind the fact that it was impossible to give official recognition to a scheme that was based on the illegal commandeering of private property. That was their excuse; the truth, she knew, lay deeper.

For a quarter of a century she had been piling up enemies by her opposition to the slave trade, by her relentless exposures of the individuals who batted on its barbarities. She had worked hand in hand with Clarkson for the passing of the Bill of 1788 for the prevention of over-crowding, and much of the evidence used by its supporters was supplied by her, or through her agency. In 1789 she had pilloried in public the meeting at the Merchants' Hall, convened to defend the traffic "on which the West India Islands and the commerce and revenue of this kingdom so essentially depend." The members of this committee comprised the majority of the Corporation, among whom one at least—Alderman Anderson—had formerly been the captain of a slaving ship. It was she who had dragged this glossed-over fact into broad daylight, and Anderson's was among the faces ranged against her round the long council table. She was sure at least of that enemy—and it was nice to be sure: she had her suspicions, moreover, of the Alderman's present activities and made a mental note to prosecute some further inquiries.

She had ranged not merely the civic powers but the Church against herself: giving time, energy and money to the publicizing of the interesting fact

that the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel ran two plantations on the slavery system in Barbados. She had written pamphlets and collaborated on others, paying for the printing and distribution out of her own pocket; she had made excerpts from Lord Muncaster's booklet, *Historical Sketches of the Slave Trade and of Its Effects in Africa*, and caused them to be distributed in broadsheet form at the street corners; Lionel had done her a set of woodcuts for them. She was widely known as a friend of Wilberforce, and Lord Sheffield had administered her a public snub which had involved him in trouble with the Saxons.

No wonder the record of her efforts at local reform was a record of bitter opposition; she was proud to think that no other person than she could have advanced against it. But public opinion may, on occasion, outweigh the power of panjandrums, and she knew herself pastmistress in the manipulation of public opinion; the advance went on, although slowly, and at what cost to herself only Pallas could say.

"There's another matter Mistress Burmester has overlooked," the Canynge was saying suavely. "A matter which, I fancy, will save us further discussion. The apartments in question overlook the public way."

"The waterfront?—which means they have light and air. You won't deny these unfortunates their title to benefits that are allotted to the most insignificant of God's creatures?"

"Now, ma'am, we must be practical! Not only the safety, but the sensibility of our fellow-townfolk has to be considered."

"The sensibility, I suppose, that pays for the privilege of gloating on the miseries of fellow-creatures? You may save your pockets, gentlemen, by allowing the public to pay your janitor's wages—"

An angry mutter of protest interrupted her. She thought, "There was a time when I guarded my tongue, when I spoke soft and sweet, for the sake of getting my own way: thank God, the time for such hypocrisies is past!"

"You surprise me, ma'am!" shrilled Mrs. Cruikshank. "Keep the lunatics downstairs, I say, where they don't offend decent people—where they're safe and sound—"

"Safe and sound?" Pallas rose slowly, her hand groping for her stick. "I will offer you a challenge, ma'am. I invite you to accompany me to our dungeons, so you may see how 'sound' our charges are. It's a visit I have long intended to pay myself, to satisfy myself of the truth of certain facts, reported to me by reliable people. As for safety—" She raised her voice above the pandemonium her suggestion had roused—"iron bars will give you all the safety you need. Come, ladies and gentlemen: let us inspect these 'safe, sound' regions, where we keep human beings whose only crime is that they've lost their wits. I'll warrant you none of us has seen the accommodation a generous Corporation provides for its dependants!"

Richard Peddy, also risen, faced her angrily.

"You've allowed yourself to be led astray by gossip, ma'am! There is no accommodation in St. Peter's that is not suitable to its purpose, and properly surveyed from time to time by those appointed to supervise it!"

"Richard Peddy." She straightened her aching back. "Your father found out, once, that it did not pay to impede the natural course of my curiosity. I suggest that some of you"—her eyes rested, as though by chance, on

Anderson's—"take care you do not share his experience. Now, gentlemen, pray give me room: I am going to look into matters for myself." She took a step towards the door, and the treacherous stiffness of her limbs betrayed her: she was obliged, clutching her stick, for a moment to stand still. "Walter Fripp," she said, turning to the Sheriff, "are you man enough to give me your arm?"

Ignoring the babel of angry voices that rose behind her, she laid her gloved hand heavily on the arm of the wretched Sheriff, who had no choice but to support her, and the pair of them moved towards the door.

"You know the way, I presume, Mr. Sheriff."

"I do not," Fripp mumbled. "It will be better if we should send for the Governor——"

"Who no doubt is enjoying his dinner. No, we can look after ourselves. There must be some turnkey or janitor who looks after these quarters; go you and find him, Walter——"

"I doubt he will accept our authority," muttered the Sheriff, who, however, obeyed the compulsion of Miss Burmester's eye.

When the turnkey appeared, shuffling in the Sheriff's wake, a violent altercation was taking place between the members of the Board who had followed them into the yard; someone, by rashly expressing approval of Miss Burmester's determination to look into matters for herself, had drawn on himself the turkey-cock rage of Peddy. Mrs. Cruikshank and Mrs. Fripp were clucking together like outraged hens, professing themselves shocked that a lady should concern herself with such vulgar matters, but unwilling to forgo a sensation. Each had heard about the "Devil-Man" from her servants, and each had been prevented by her ladyhood from gratifying a morbid curiosity; each was inwardly thrilled by the prospect of doing so, under the cloak of charity.

The Governor, whom someone had summoned from his dinner, appeared in his doorway, still wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and endeavouring to stow a large piece of suet, which he had been unable to swallow, away in the bulge of his cheek. To him Peddy addressed himself furiously, his gestures showing that he inculpated Pallas, who stood in the middle of the yard, both hands clasped on the crook of her stick, her head thrown back, her eyes fixed on the heavens, as though she had nothing in the world to do but admire their beauty. She appeared to have become both blind and deaf to her surroundings.

"Well, gentlemen, I suppose we must get on with this business? I take it I have your support in requesting the ladies to retire?"

A disappointed little squeak broke from Mrs. Fripp. Apparently addressing a puff of cloud, Pallas remarked:

"It was my suggestion. And I shall not retire."

It was so evidently useless to argue with her that the men turned aside, Fripp muttering in an undertone to his wife, Mr. Canynge so far forgetting his usual gentlemanliness as to snarl at his cousin Cruikshank, who tossed her head and retorted that Pallas Burmester need not think she had them all in leading strings, or that they were likely to defer to her judgment without being given the opportunity to form their own conclusions. Thus quarrelling,

the ladies and gentlemen of the Board arrived at the nail-studded door which led down to the cells.

As it swung in, over a worn flight of stairs, so intolerable a stench arose that those in the foreground fell back exclaiming, their hands to their noses:

"Oh, la, 'tis impossible!" gasped the Sheriff's wife.

"Have you your pomander?" Pallas spoke grimly as she took a step nearer to the appalling pit. She snatched the necessary object from the seemingly nerveless hand of Mrs. Fripp. Mrs. Cruikshank said: "Gracious heaven!" turned green and faltered; her cousin took the opportunity to thrust her out of the way where, with trembling knees and closed eyes, she clung to the whipping post.

"Maria!" cried the Sheriff suddenly, "I forbid you to accompany us!" He succeeded for once in his prohibition; Mrs. Fripp gave one shriek before falling into the arms of a nervous little Board member who, with his wig askew, seemed grateful of the excuse to exempt himself from joining the exploratory party.

Miss Burmester took one glance at the steps before sweeping her skirts under her arm, it could be no worse, after all, than that journey into the bowels of the *Cassiopæia*. The most gazelle-like ankles in Bristol, the narrowest small feet drew a glance of guilty admiration from her ex-swain, who set his lips and pinched his nostrils together before offering her his arm. Let Maria make all the jealous fuss she liked! A woman who insisted on undertaking such an expedition as this was worth supporting.

The Governor, having swallowed his suet, and resentful of the usurpation of his authority, had angrily demanded the keys from the janitor, who surrendered them reluctantly. "Charlie's" conscience was not clear; there were, after all, supposed to be certain rules about clearance and cleansing about which he had not, recently, troubled himself. "The quality" had no business taking a man by surprise. . . . The shocked procession followed him down the stairs.

"You better be wary! It's a-gettin' on for feedin' time!"

To hell with these females as wouldn't let the men draw back when once they started going. If one or two suffered qualms of caution it was not likely they would betray them with Miss Pallas Burmester leading the way.

"Good God above, are these wild beasts?"—she removed her handkerchief from her mouth to mutter.

After fumbling with a keyhole in the dark the Governor cautiously opened a door an inch or two; there was a rustle, a half-smothered groan, and a noise like animals scuffling across the floor; he slammed it again; beads of sweat speckled his brow which he mopped with a grimy clout.

"It is not prudent, gentlemen!"

A gloved hand crossed his shoulder and thrust on the door, which swung in once more, over an indistinguishable pit. The eyes of all strove into the gloom, and gradually accustomed themselves to the obscurity in which moved shapes that slowly resolved themselves into heads, limbs, half-bestial bodies sunk on all fours in the unspeakable filth of the invisible floor. There was a foot-square grating sunk deep in the upper wall at the farther end of the room, and through this came a beam of faint light. The air was miasmic;

a single drop of the moisture that condensed on the walls would have killed a man.

There was a sudden rush towards the open door; bare arms and sub-human faces reached and whined, Pallas felt her heart miss a beat as something clutched at her ankle.

"God help you, poor soul!" she muttered. Someone shouted, the turnkey came stumbling to beat and kick his victims back from the door, which he dragged close, taking the keys to lock it from the Governor's shaking hand.

"Disgusting!" muttered someone.

In the sudden pitch-darkness came Pallas's condemnation.

"So this is your 'suitable accommodation,' Mr. Chairman?"

"That's enough!"

"Nay, where's the savage? We may as well take a look at him now we're here!" The speaker, Anderson, was better off than the others, having a disease of the nasal passages which had destroyed his olfactory nerves. He was determined to give the Burmester vixen all she had asked for.

"You better look out, gents! He ain't quiet, like them others."

"Miss Burmester, I implore you!"

"Where is your so-called savage, sir?"

It was a smaller door, and the room on which it opened was no larger than a cupboard; three steps, silted up to the treads with slime, led down into it; there was a faint trickle of invisible water. "Charlie" opened it cautiously, interposing his thick body between it and the party he was conducting; he had unhitched a bludgeon whose knob was studded with iron nails from the leather belt in which he carried it, and swung it as though prepared for an onslaught; some of the company were impressed by this crude piece of play-acting; one was breathing heavily, another wheezed, but all, apparently, found it prudent to be silent.

"Ah, 'e's sleepin'!"

Hardly visible against the farther wall lay a figure, flat on its back, with arms flung out as though crucified. The bare knees were drawn up, the ankles shackled, the arches of the naked ribs stared through the matted hair that covered the immense limbs and hid the unconscious face of the sleeper.

"Do not disturb the poor soul." She had a momentary fear of fainting; it was as though something—some spirit—slipped out of that derelict body, came close, and touched her own. Walter Fripp, himself sufficiently nauseated, felt her sag against his arm, and cursed his weakmindedness in countenancing this folly. "Come away, ma'am," he whispered, but she seemed to be deaf.

"He looks peaceful enough!" grunted Peddy disappointedly.

"Even the mad are peaceful in sleep, Mr. Peddy!"

"'E ain't so peaceful when 'e's awake, I can tell yer, gentlemen! A roarin' lion be no more treacherous than he," protested Charlie, evidently resenting this belittlement of his own dangers. "I reckon 'e's near seven foot 'igh when 'e stands on 'is 'ind legs."

"And you confine him in this kennel!"

The men stood aside to let her pass, and on several faces there were expressions of malicious satisfaction. This would teach her not to poke her nose where it was not wanted!

She heard a deep groan and the rattle of a chain; someone pushed her unceremoniously, there was a scuffle for the stairs, and the clanging of a door cut off a hoarse, desperate bellow.

"Did you see the mad devil?" Walter Fripp's wife was panting, her loose mouth moist and avid for horrors.

The men, as they emerged, were silent; without Pallas's presence they might have jested, passed it off and forgotten it in their midday wine, but even the least sensitive, and those who most resented her presence, felt a qualm, a certain shameful, as though horror became more horrible when viewed through a woman's eyes.

"I make no comments, gentlemen," she was saying. "I honour you by assuming that your conscience will supply a commentary more poignant than any I can offer, and leave you to act upon it."

She swept the curtsey for which she was famous in Bristol—the fine, stiff-necked, flat-backed curtsey that dated back to an age when every woman of fashion powdered her hair and took care not to sully her flounces by over-exuberant movement; both powder and curtsey were things of the past, but their splendours revived in Pallas's obeisance. She took cool farewell of the ladies and accepted the Sheriff's arm to her coach.

"Can we save your legs, Mr. Sheriff? We shall be driving through the town."

"I thank ye, ma'am, my own horses are waiting, and I'm due at Brislington within the hour."

She lingered, her hand on the window of the coach.

"You were always a fine judge of horse-flesh, Walter."

Startled by the compliment, he showed satisfaction.

"And took rare care of your beasts. Tell me: would you house one of those fine mares of yours in the cesspits we have seen this morning?" Before he found words to parry the thrust, she had raised her hand in farewell, calling to her coachman to drive on.

"Have you won, miss?" Pilgrim, who had been waiting in the coach, inquired with suppressed eagerness.

"God knows," she sighed. "If I have not . . ." Her voice trailed away; so much fighting, always, and she was getting an old woman. But this battle she must win for the sake of—her own credit she would have said a few hours ago: her own credit and Bristol's and the essential decency of the human race. Yet within the last hour her viewpoint had altered, had lost its lofty perspective: it had narrowed down in some way to a cupboard-like cell, and to one man, the dishonoured image of God, lying there cramped and confined—as thousands of others must have lain, but with this difference: that she had not seen them. This, she came to the conclusion, was the reason of the deep, poignant ache in her heart—the organ she tried so strictly to control in her works of charity. For a surrender to sentiment meant, she had found, a surrender of capacity for clear thought and practical action. She fought against it now with all her strength of will, but despite her struggle a cry broke through.

"Pilgrim, if you had seen him! He must have been one of the noblest of God's creatures when he was himself."

"Who, miss?"

"The poor foreigner. If they don't act on it," she muttered, clenching her hands, "I shall write to the *Journal*."

"They was all there, I suppose that Anderson and all?" As Pallas made no immediate reply her maid leaned forward and touched her on the knee. "I've got a bit of news, miss, as I warrant you'll be interested to hear!"

"What is it?" She spoke indifferently, lost in her thoughts; but at the next moment the indifference had vanished in the information Fanny had brought her.

"It can be but gossip, Fanny! Who told you such a tale?"

"'Twas Mr. Bowling, and you know as well as I do, miss, he ain't one for gossip! The men's back in Bristol and they're not saying anything—not likely, with their pockets snugly lined! But it seems one of them got tipsy and it all come out in the Dolphin. And Anderson and Peddy's in it up to their necks."

"You'd better be careful what you say; you know the position Mr. Peddy holds in the Society."

"I know the way he's behaved to you, miss, and now you've got a handle of your own against him maybe you'll be better able to stand up for your rights."

Pallas smiled grimly.

"No one's ever accused me of weakness in that respect, my girl! But if it's true that Peddy's still involved in the slave traffic, while claiming our respect as a pillar of Abolition——! I'll look into this, Fanny. You're right; the information might come in very handy one day."

"And I'll be bound he's not the only one either," sniffed Pilgrim, gratified at the result of her news-carrying. "It's hard to get at the truth of such things in Bristol; folks clings together like a piece of knitting—drop a stitch and you don't know where it'll end! But I'll keep my ears open and see what I can pick up. A bit here and a bit there's hanged a man before now!"

III

In sleep there is no madness; and always that first moment of wakefulness, before material facts, like flung clods, bludgeoned his wounded mind back to its state of confusion, was a moment of exquisite lucidity. On the edge of wakefulness a voice had spoken to his soul, a voice which said: "*And you confine him in this kennel!*"

His heart ceased to beat, his breath was arrested in his lungs. He opened his mouth wide to shout but no sound came. Then he understood that he was dreaming . . . one of those long, vague dreams that alternated with nightmare: dreams that crumbled like the ashes of roses with the opening of his eyes. There were peacocks in those dreams, and long smooth slopes of sward of an unbelievable greenness; where could such greenness be in all a world which was choked with sand and burning horizons and baked into univrsal brown by never-setting sun?

There were two silver threads of river drawn like ribbons across the green earth; there was a house, crowning like a temple an umbrageous rise of turf, there was a boskage of trees whose names he had forgotten and a deli-

cate scent of crushed grass and flowers. Sometimes there were figures, like the drawings out of books, which strayed vaguely across the grass, but to these he could never set a name or perceive them otherwise than indistinctly as part of a painted scene, and their presence disturbed rather than comforted him. These were the things which appeared between waking and sleeping, and he crushed his eyelids together, trying to hold at bay the return of consciousness with all its attendant torments.

And you confine him in this kennel.

Forgetting the chains, he came to his feet with a bound that jerked him crashing once more on his face. The clanging of the door drowned the roar which was beaten out of his sore body.

When they came a little later to thrust in his platter of food he was foaming at the mouth, and the blood from his galled ankles ran over the bones of his feet. He was raging in several tongues and beating with his fists upon the low ceiling, so that he did not even notice the attendant, who laughed, swore at him and went out again, slamming the door. Long before night descended blackness took possession of the cell, but for this prisoner there was no blackness: his eyes ran and watered with the eternal, blazing sun. The sun, my idol: the sun, my undoing: and now, beyond the sun, he sought, in madness, for his God.

CHAPTER VI

I

"CONVERSATION piece!" thought Lionel, his eye straying—to his mother's annoyance—from the array of "marriages" beside his left elbow to the charming grouping beside the fire; Lady Aurora was showing her small son Perry how to play cat's cradle, while Lord Edward, with Perry's sister, Catherine, on his knee, looked benevolently on. Lionel's right hand itched for the pencil, but he had devoted this evening to *bézique* with his mother.

Orabella triumphantly snapped a seven of trumps into the place of a ten and completed her sequence; she tossed her head when Lionel congratulated her.

"You threw away your own seven," she reproached him. "I wasn't going to tell you; but it's not very amusing to play with so inattentive a partner as you, Lionel!"

He apologized.

"Would you rather we had some music?"

"No, no!" He would be off on his tedious drawing; she trumped an ace with an expression almost of malice, frowning at his easy-going chuckle. Then the door opened and a tall, calm figure came unheralded into the room.

Orabella's jaw dropped, for a moment she held her breath, then, with a scream, scattering her cards, she flew across the room.

"Beaufort!"

There was a modified babel of welcome—modified in deference to Beaufort's known dislike for affectionate demonstration; setting down little Catherine, Lord Edward warmly clasped his son's hand, and Lady Aurora, after receiving her brother-in-law's chilly salute, shepherded her children into formal bow and curtsy, which were received by Beaufort with admirable solemnity. He did not care for children; moreover, his distaste for Peregrine's delicate little boy was enhanced by the fact that Perry stood—for the present—between him and the inheritance. He had been informed that there was nothing to trouble about on that score: that the chances were a hundred to one of Perry's ever attaining maturity, but this, if anything, increased his annoyance. Beaufort had a great regard for the proprieties; he resented being made to appear eager for his nephew's demise.

"But—you are alone?" Orabella spoke almost timidly. She could not love this cold, reserved son of hers, but she was proud of what she regarded as his aristocracy.

"Alone? Why not?" Beaufort was critically appraising a recent landscape of Lionel's which, newly back from the frame-maker's, leaned against the back of a chair, awaiting decision where it was to be hung. Beaufort's eyeglass rose, was lowered; Lionel thought, "He behaves as though he were a famous critic!" yet could not forbear admiration for Beaufort's *tenue* in the face of a subject of which he knew nothing.

"But—but you said you were bringing s-someone with you!" stuttered Orabella

"Ah, the señorita de Lorcha. Her plans are altered; she remains for the present in London," said Beaufort coolly.

It was not until they had dined, and he, his parents and Lionel sat alone in the dining-room, that he deigned to explain the position. Lady Aurora, pleading sleepiness, had delicately withdrawn; she, after all, was not one of the family; she had been too long at Paragon not to realize Orabella's jealous claim on the full attention of her sons.

"It is a long story," said Beaufort, "and I will not weary you with the whole of it. To put it in short, it was imperative for the señorita de Lorcha and her relatives to leave Madrid at short notice, and with all possible speed."

"Beaufort!" Orabella rapped on the table; Beaufort might be a diplomatic bigwig, but he was also her son! She was going to stand for none of this kind of thing. "It's no use your being diplomatic and cautious here! You've set us all by the ears, proposing to bring a foreigner to Paragon, and now, if you please, you can just explain yourself. Who is this Miss de Lorcha?"—she scorned foreign titles—"and how does her business come to be mixed up with yours?"

Lord Edward sent her a look of tender understanding and admiration; he alone of those present guessed that Orabella's heart was drumming against her breastbone, that she was as badly frightened as any woman may be whose insular upbringing has left her ignorant of how to cope with a foreign daughter-in-law.

"She is a relative," said Beaufort, "of the marqués de Montalba, a Cuban nobleman accused of complicity in a plot to murder the duque de Alcudía. The plot was discovered and the marqués murdered—no doubt by Alcudía's supporters. The deed has roused great feeling in Madrid, since the Montalbas, being high in court favour, had many enemies. The marquesa was warned to flee the country, and I was instrumental in arranging for her escape, and that of her niece and children; they accompanied me to London, where they are waiting for suitable opportunity to return to Cuba."

"Oh, so she's going back to Cuba." The relief in Orabella's voice was patent. Beaufort raised his eyebrows.

"The marquesa will return at the first possible moment; her home and her family are there, and she is racked by her experiences in Madrid. The señorita de Lorcha and her dueña are remaining in England for the present."

"Indeed? Why?" demanded Lady Edward.

Beaufort bowed his head with diplomatic meekness.

"I am not on such terms with the señorita as to be fully informed of her motives, Mama; all that I know is that she proposes, in the near future, to visit Bristol."

"Bristol?" He might have said the reaches of the moon, from the astonishment in Orabella's voice.

"Why not Bristol, Mama?" Lionel teased her. "Surely you know that Bristol is the greatest and most important city in the islands of Britain?"

"Hold your tongue, sir," snapped Orabella. Since her marriage she had affected to despise Bristol, but her sons knew that the least word in disparagement of their mother's native city brought her claws to the surface. "What," she demanded, "should a Spanish woman know of Bristol?"

"The señorita is a creole, Mama——"

"What—a negress!" gasped Orabella.

Lord Edward laughed gently as he corrected her.

"A creole, my dear, is a person of pure European blood born in the Spanish colonies," he exclaimed.

"It appears," added Beaufort, "that the señorita had English ancestry, through whom she is entitled to a certain estate in Bristol——"

"What estate? La, this is amusing!" Objection vanished; an English ancestry must put even a foreign daughter-in-law in Orabella's good graces.

"The name conveys nothing to me; probably you may know it, Mama," said Beaufort, who in his short sojourns at Paragon had ignored his bucolic neighbours, and who was the only member of the younger generation who had deplored having a Bristol merchant as maternal grandfather. "Probably Aunt Pallas has heard of a place called Triton Lodge——"

"Edward——" said Orabella faintly; but it was Lionel who caught her in his arms.

"What is it, Mama darling——?"

It was several minutes before Orabella was able to speak coherently; the colour had gone from her cheeks, for once she looked her age, and, knowing it, brushed the knowledge aside.

"Beau—Beau—you're sure you've got the name right?"

"Quite sure." But his cold, indolent manner had vanished; the monocle glittered in his eye, he sat stiffly, his eye fixed on his mother. In his heart he was saying, "Whatever I am now about to hear, she'll be mine. Nothing shall prevent it."

"Edward—that it should be Triton Lodge!" She pressed her fingers to her eyelids, forcing them down upon her thoughts. "Wait—wait; what does this mean? A creole—Cuba——"

"Hadn't we better leave it, Mama, until we see Aunt Pallas?" Lionel spoke in a troubled voice. His mother's confidant, he had learned from her the tragic story of Pallas's lost love, and his young memory retained particulars which had almost faded from hers.

"No—no—be quiet," she hushed him distractedly; she rose from the table and began to pace up and down the room, the black levantine satin train of her gown, with its heavy encrustations of gold and pearl embroidery, following her with a soft hiss. "Beau," she turned to cry suddenly, "are you going to marry this Miss—Miss——?"

He became frozen, distant.

"No such suggestion has, so far, been mooted between us," he answered, as to a stranger.

"It is just as well!"

"My love——" Lord Edward spoke mildly, warningly. She turned on him as though he had rebuked her.

"You know who Triton Lodge belonged to?"

"The Floods," he answered, as his eyes met hers. He had listened, often, to her raging animadversions on Matthew Flood, who, she declared, had ruined Pallas's life.

"If this Miss—Miss Whatever-her-name-is claims to be a descendant of the Floods, she had better prove her ancestry! Or perhaps," said Orabella viciously, "she had better not! Other people will do it for her."

Beaufort rose, his tight, white face like a mask over his anger.

"According to my information, Mama, she has done so already. I had the honour, a few days ago, of escorting her to a firm of reputable lawyers, Rice, Jernigan and Grylls——" As he paused, Orabella cut in maliciously:

"Indeed! And were you present at the interview?"

"I have, for the present, no authority to pry into the señorita de Lorcha's private affairs——"

"At present!" she mocked him. "At present, indeed! You can't deceive me, Beau; you never did, you know, even as a little boy." It was true; Orabella's boast that she "saw through" Beau had proved true on several occasions. "Perhaps I can give you information about Miss de Lorcha's private affairs which she has concealed from you. Perhaps she hasn't told you yet that her grandmother was a nigger."

"Nonsense!" The word came like a pistol shot; it was evident that Beaufort was shaken out of his customary complacency. After a glance, Lord Edward averted his eyes from his eldest son's.

"Orry, my dear, you cannot be certain——"

"Certain? And who else could she be? Claiming Triton Lodge, and Flood descent, and coming from Cuba? If you've forgotten all the details of that scandal, Edward, I have not. If she was one of the Barbados Floods she would be English, and her name would not be de Lorcha. If she isn't Matthew Flood's granddaughter she's his great-grandchild, and at all events there's black blood in her veins. And this," concluded Orabella indignantly, "was what you were proposing to bring to Paragon!"

His lips were pressed tightly together, there was a vein throbbing in his temple; he drew his heels together, made his mother a bow, and went from the room. The three who remained were silent; then Orabella threw herself into a chair and began sobbing. With a glance at his father Lionel left them alone.

"Edward, it can't be true. Beaufort would never disgrace us like that!"

Lord Edward sat down beside her and took her hand.

"On that score, my dear, I think you need have no misgivings. If these assumptions about Miss de Lorcha prove to be true——"

"What else can they prove? But, oh, Edward, I know that cold, stubborn look of Beaufort's; he had it when he was a little boy, when he was planning to do something he knew would hurt all our feelings."

Lord Edward shook his head

"To whatever extent his passions may be engaged, you may count on his not sacrificing his career. My dear, you know Beaufort plans to become an ambassador; he would never be so mad as to hamper himself with a half-breed wife."

II

Beaufort Sax had done, he considered, the best of which he was capable, in setting down his party of travellers at the lodgings in Carrington Street, Mayfair, before repairing himself to Thomas's Hotel in Berkeley Square, the proprietor of which had recommended the Carrington Street rooms when

Beaufort explained to him the difficulties of accommodating half a dozen foreign refugees who had not between them a syllable of English. Mrs. Pardon, the *châtelaine* of No. 4 Carrington Street, was herself, according to the good Thomas, a Frenchwoman, and could be relied on to make the strangers feel at home.

Beaufort was relieved; he had had enough of his charges—at least of the marquesa and of Madame Deschamps, whom he now recognized as his implacable enemy, not to mention the two disagreeable young Montalba boys, whose exploits in brothels during their flight across Spain had on at least one occasion nearly involved the whole party in a dangerous incident. One of the company they had shed: Doña Silvia, who, at Valladolid, had discovered a distant, elderly relation, and declared her intention of not continuing another yard on their frightful journey. Undisturbed by the marquesa's tears, by evocations of Havana, she settled down firmly, in the traditional Spanish fashion, to become an incumbent on the household of a third or fourth cousin by marriage. Havana! They were indeed optimists if they expected, any of them, to see Havana again.

The fortitude which Lucía had displayed during the earlier stages of their journey vanished completely with the crossing of the Channel. She had indeed astonished them all, with her thin laughter, her foolish little jests at some of the sights they saw on the way; Madame Deschamps believed secretly that the shock of her sorrow had turned her brain. But with her arrival in England the marquesa became suddenly and terribly sane; possessed, apparently, of an overwhelming terror, they could neither make her eat nor rest. Cuba, Cuba, Cuba: they must get back to Cuba. They must not remain in this black England, in this little, frightful, black lodging for another week, day, hour.

"But, Tía Lucía," María Pía tried to persuade her, "what is the use, just yet, of our rushing back to Cuba? To begin with, we have to find out about a ship; we have to arrange about money and to buy some clothes—we have almost nothing except what we stand up in! Luckily I have the letters of credit on the Spanish banks; we must see a lawyer and find out what can be arranged, we must think and plan a little——"

"Plan? What have we to plan? What is there to do but to get home?" The marquesa, rocking herself, the infant Epifanía clasped to her emaciated bosom, lifted her streaming eyes to the girl who stood over her.

The girl? It was no longer a girl; a hard maturity had settled upon María Pía, it showed in her face, hard, secret, set with some curious, inner determination: in her bearing, which was less that of a girl than of a man. It was she who had grasped, even more distinctly than Madame Deschamps, the dangers of their position, with the Queen's favour withdrawn, and all those who formerly had courted them fled from their vicinity.

It was María Pía who had kept her head in the household panic: it was she who finally succeeded in convincing Lucía that the latter's idea of fleeing to Sevilla and taking the first ship for Cuba was as dangerous as it was futile. If their enemies wanted to destroy them, nothing was easier than for them to pursue and assassinate them on that road. They must hide, and leave the capital in some unexpected direction; they must separate, and meet at some given spot—there were hours of discussion before Lucía would agree to this very obvious precaution: even so, Beaufort's diplomatic privi-

leges, of which he availed himself to the last degree, barely gave them time to make their preparations.

Now, she felt, her patience was exhausted, and her mind made up. She turned and spoke to Madame Deschamps, who had washed and was ironing some fichus on a table in the crowded little room, which appeared to these ladies, so accustomed to space in their surroundings, no better than a vulgar junk shop.

"And what do you think about returning to Cuba?"

"Think? *Voyons*, what should I think? That the sooner arrangements are made, the better. We cannot remain indefinitely, *ma chère*, incumbents upon the charity of Monsieur Sax and his friends." The more so, she might have added, in that, to her knowledge, Beaufort had done nothing to place his relationship to María Pía upon a formal footing.

"*Bien*. Then we had better pack Tía Lucía and the family off as quickly as possible."

Madame Deschamps suspended her occupation, the iron poised in the air.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this: that I am not, for the present, returning to Cuba."

"And what do you propose to do?" asked Madame Deschamps, when the marquesa's wail had subsided.

"I am remaining in England, at least for a little while."

"It is not possible," moaned Lucía. "What will your father say?"

"What has he to say? He cannot complain that I do not return to my home, since it no longer represents home to me," said María Pía, with reason.

"Ay, that I should be the cause of such bitterness!"

"You? What has it to do with you?" María Pía asked her aunt harshly.

"I should not have allowed Leonor to marry him. Ay, ay, it is all my fault. And I loved you better than my own child—I loved you second only to your poor mother."

"Let that be forgotten, Tía Lucía. I haven't got any bitterness against Leonor, or against my new little half-brother. It is only that I am—alone!" She turned towards them both, flinging out her hands with a sudden, final gesture. "Who is there, in Cuba, who cares a *perra-chica* for me? There is Papa, you say—*madre de dios*, I know Papa better than either of you do! Perhaps he loves me: I dare say he does. But he is glad to be rid of me, because I embarrass him."

"That is not true, *ma chère*," was Madame Deschamps' quiet reply. "But even if it were, can you not imagine his feelings, if you, his daughter, were to remain in Europe, wandering about by yourself? *Sois raisonnable, ma petite!* You know that such a thing is not permissible, for any young girl of good family."

"*Qué disparate!*" There was bitter scorn in her voice. "Do you think any one can go through the experiences through which I—we all—have gone, and remain a sheltered virgin?" At the look of horror in the two women's faces, she burst into harsh laughter. "Come, you needn't look so stupefied! I am no longer sheltered, but as it happens I am still a virgin—*parce que ce monsieur est anglais, et les anglais sont excèsivement cérémonieux avec les femmes!*" she added rapidly. "Could I have been in such places and situations as those into which our adventures have led us with one of my own countrymen,

and preserved the modesty proper to my own sex, do you think? It would not have been possible! Our men, certainly they are no less gallant, but they are *muy hombre*, and to them it would not be natural—indeed, it would seem an insult—to make no use of their opportunities. I myself would see no virtue in such discretion, if it proceeded from indifference, but I can assure you I have had ample proof that Beaufort Sax is not indifferent to my attractions!” She spoke with a bravado, even with a coarseness, that roused a deep uneasiness in her dueña’s heart. It was as though the experiences of the past weeks had made her impatient of all feminine delicacy, as though she had taken some shock in the tender fibres of her sex that had profoundly altered her nature. Madame Deschamps remembered that it had sometimes pleased Isabela de Coria to affect masculine coarseness, but with her it was only a facet of her insatiable coquetry; in María Pía it suggested a more sinister portent. Madame Deschamps, whose religion, as we have seen, was mainly a graceful convention, found herself praying earnestly to God that she and her charge might be delivered safely in Cuba before worse came to them.

The marquesa was too weak and broken to argue; still hugging her baby, she kept up a faint, pitiful wailing, regardless of Madame Deschamps’ soothing caresses, the ill-concealed impatience of María Pía. At last the latter broke out:

“*Por dios*, Tía Lucía, what have you to cry about, now that we are safe and sound on English soil?”

But still she kept up her faint, mindless wailing, and it was so apparent that she did not even know what they were saying that Madame Deschamps spoke sharply and openly to María Pía.

“You know we could not leave her to make the journey to Cuba alone.”

“Alone? Juan-María and Ramón will go with her; I am sure they will be glad enough to leave London! They say there’s not a girl worth looking at in this part of the world!” Again she gave her harsh, almost indecent laugh; she was lounging on the window-sill, her shoulders pushed up to her ears by the weight on her elbows, her legs crossed carelessly—a lad’s position. She looked down into the little Mayfair street, with its busy traffic. Madame Deschamps went to her and touched her on the shoulder.

“*Tu es sérieuse, ma fille?*”

“But of course I am serious,” she retorted with a hard look. “Do you forget I have English blood in me? Well, then, it pleases me to stay here awhile and make acquaintance of my grandfather’s people. It’s better Tía Lucía should go back to Havana, since she is that way.” She jerked her head casually towards the marquesa.

“Do you realize the trouble she will get into with your father, for permitting you to remain behind?”

“I shall send him a letter, saying that I am staying, for the present, with my English relatives; there is bound to be some of the family still in Bristol,” said the girl.

“But you are fantastic!” Madame Deschamps controlled her rising anger with difficulty. “Why should they be there? Why, if they were there, should they receive you?”

“Not receive members of one’s own family? It is you who are fantastic!”

“Come, there has been enough of this folly. You know you cannot resist

your father's will; you are unmarried, dependent on him for your maintenance. . . . Moreover, with your ignorance of the language and the customs, you are at a great disadvantage in this country. You have no background, no one to sponsor you into the kind of society it is proper for you to frequent——”

María Pía changed her position abruptly, leaning now backwards against the window-frame, her backward-thrust elbows forcing into prominence her firm, young bosom and the long narrow sweep of her thighs.

“I'm quite aware of the truth of all you say. But there are ways of overcoming all these difficulties.”

“Are you going to marry Beaufort Sax?” the Frenchwoman asked bluntly. The girl's eyes narrowed.

“I might do, if it suits me.”

“You must see that no woman of your age can continue to travel about from place to place, with no companion save one of her own sex.”

“Then you approve of the idea of my marrying Beaufort?”

“I have not said so. I only indicate the impropriety of the present situation. If, however, you persist in not returning to Cuba, I would merely point out to you, *ma chère*, that a husband is a necessity, and the sooner you provide yourself with one the better.”

“What makes you dislike Beaufort so much?” María Pía asked curiously.

“I have not said I dislike him, have I? If anything, the sentiment is on the other side. I should be unperceptive indeed, if I had failed to remark the many occasions on which he has striven to separate us.”

“That, at least, he will not succeed in doing,” said the girl, more gently.

“Other things may do it for him. I am not so young as I was, *ma chère*; I cannot continue much longer to trail about continents in your company.”

María Pía looked uneasy. Straightening herself, she drew a little closer to her *dueña* and touched her on the arm, with a warning glance at the marquesa, although it was evident the latter was not listening.

“Come, I will tell you my plans,” she said, on a lowered note. “I have had it all clear in my mind for some time, but it was no use trying to talk while we were so tired and irritable with travelling. Of course you are right in all you say; if I remain in England I must find a protector, and for that—you see, I am being very candid—I do not yet know whether or not I can rely upon Monsieur Sax. I would marry him, but I am not at all disposed to become his mistress; first because I do not love him, and second because that could only gain me a *mauvaise entrée* among people I should like to impress. But if I place myself under the protection of his mother, the English noblewoman, I should certainly secure the right sort of patronage, should I not?”

“Have you discussed this with him?” Madame Deschamps concealed her astonishment at María Pía's foresight.

“Not in those precise terms; but if we go to Bristol, you know it is very close to their summer palace. He cannot do less than present me to his family, and the fact of having a house of my own in Bristol, and relatives who are important people locally, will place us at an advantage, and absolve us of all suspicion of casting ourselves upon English hospitality.”

To Madame Deschamps the scheme sounded incredibly far-fetched, María Pía's confidence in the complaisance of Beaufort Sax's family almost childish.

Nor had they yet been properly into this Bristol business, regarding which, on Beaufort's suggestion, they had still to see the solicitors whom he, with considerable trouble, had routed out with the assistance of a legal friend who had heard of the Molino de Haros firm and knew the name of their English representatives. (It had been a considerable relief to Beaufort to discover that the marquesa had contacts with so reputable an English firm as Messrs. Rice, Jernigan and Grylls; he had begun to be queasy about the money he had been obliged, on behalf of the fugitives, to pour out like water.)

Madame Deschamps made one further appeal to María Pfa.

"*Ma chère*, you must not make any decisions without much thought and some legal advice; I presume these English people are qualified to advise you. I only implore you most seriously to consider your father, and the anxiety your conduct is bound to cause him, if you do not return to Cuba with your aunt."

"If he is so anxious," was the bitter retort, "let him come to England and fetch me! It would prove that he thinks at least as much of me as he does of Buonaventura."

"That is not fair, and it is not kind. You know how impossible such a journey would be for him, with all his affairs to see to."

She was obliged, however, to recognize the futility of argument, as she was obliged to recognize and acquiesce in the stubborn decision of María Pfa's nature, the strange, bitter independence which was the outcome, it seemed, of the searing experiences through which she had just come. Save in the presence of Beaufort Sax, when she assumed a manner of almost exaggerated, and certainly ironic, demureness, she had developed the brusque speech and habits of a man; it was she who governed the household, who ordered the meals, took charge of her aunt and the baby, boxed the boys' ears when they came home impudent, or, on one occasion intoxicated, from their nameless jaunts about the town.

And at last the day came when the widowed marquesa fled to the reassurance and comfort of her family like a wounded animal crawling back to its lair. Santiago's anger was nothing to her; she sought only to bury her broken heart in the bosom of her family—to hang one more cobweb on the walls of the Aroche palace, to be clasped to the fleshless bosoms of Beata aunts and to receive Don Diego's frozen commiseration. Let Isabela clamour over her head; she was past caring for such tumults. So she went rocking towards Cuba, thinking that, if the worst came to the worst, she could follow the rest of her sisters into the cloister.

III

A grave young woman with a shabby hat but not unhumorous mouth dropped a curtsy as she came into Miss Burmester's room, and was obviously pleased by the warm kiss she received.

"How kind of you, Flora my dear!" said Pallas, as she took the books which the visitor had brought from a shabbily gloved hand and pressed her into a chair. "Sit down and have a rest before you begin to tell me how things have gone to-day. How's your mother?"

"She's much as usual, thank you, ma'am; and, 'pon my soul," said Flora, smiling, "I believe it does her good to have a little quarrel with me! At any rate, it gives poor Father a rest."

"I suppose she's displeased with you for leaving the Fripps, and coming to help me?"

"Displeased is a mild way of putting it. Poor Mama, I'm afraid she's terribly shocked. I can't convince her that all I have to do is weigh the foodstuffs and look after the linen; she keeps on about 'menial duties,' and nothing I can say will persuade her that I was much more of a menial at Mrs. Fripp's—where I don't think any servant would put up with what I sometimes had to endure." She stopped to laugh. "Poor Mama! It's not really her fault; it's uncle Richard who has been putting her up to it."

"Your uncle Richard and I certainly aren't on very good terms, and I don't suppose it pleases him to know you are working for me. Did you read my letter in the *Journal*?"

"Yes, indeed, and I only hope it has the effect it deserves. It caused quite an explosion in our house, I can tell you! Mama and Papa nearly came to blows over it—for, as you know, Papa is always on your side. Oh dear, what a pity it is that uncle Richard and Mr. Fripp have so much influence."

"Say rather, it's a pity they don't use it to better ends. I think your uncle might help you all a great deal more than he does, Flora; he must be a very rich man."

"I should think so." Flora paused to consider it. "Though of course there isn't the money there used to be in shipping, now that so much of our trade is going to Liverpool. Still, uncle's not going to be caught out that way. It's supposed to be a great secret, but of course there's no harm in telling you, though Mama said I wasn't to speak of it. Uncle Richard's just been offered a partnership in one of the Liverpool companies—I think the name was Hultmann and Long, or something like that: so he doesn't need to worry that his Bristol trade isn't doing quite as well as usual."

"Hultmann and Long? Flora, are you sure?"

"I'm almost sure that was the name; I wouldn't be likely to make it up, would I?"

"Hardly; and yet—my dear, you must be mistaken. It's one of the biggest slaving lines."

"But—oh, no! Of course uncle Richard would never take part in that. How could he, belonging to the Society, and everything. How extraordinary! I must be mistaken, after all; I must have dreamt it," said Flora, obviously so taken aback that no one could have doubted her sincerity.

"Perhaps you didn't. How did your mother learn about it? Did your uncle tell her?"

"Good gracious, no! He never tells Mama anything. As a matter of fact, it's quite ridiculous, the way we heard of it, and perhaps we oughtn't to have taken any notice. It was our jobbing man who told Mama about it, when he came to mend the drawing-room blinds last week. He used to be a sailor, you know, and I'm afraid he goes a good deal to the sailors' taverns. I believe all the Bristol gossip comes from there!" Flora broke off at the look on the other's face. "I'm afraid I've shocked you," she burst out. "I suppose we

ought not to gossip with such plebeian people! But we see so little society nowadays, and there are so few people to chatter to——”

Pallas put out her hand to check the girl's anxious exculpation.

“My dear, please. . . . You don't know how important this is. Could you not find out, from some other, authoritative source, whether the story is true? Don't you see, if it is false, your uncle should be given the opportunity to deny it; if it is true, it is a very serious matter, involving, as it does, a member of our Society.”

“I'll do my best; but I'm afraid I don't know many authoritative people. Could not you——?”

“It would be very difficult for me, in my position, to appear to be prying into your uncle's private affairs; it is natural that you and your mother should take interest in the family business, since you derive some portion of your means from it,” said Pallas gravely. “Well, let us get back to our own affairs. Have you got anything in particular to report to me?”

“One or two things,” said Flora, straightening up in her chair. “The first is—oh, ma'am, do you think Miss Amelia Flood *must* be allowed to come and read gloomy tracts to the patients?”

The corner of Pallas's mouth twitched

“It's rather a delicate point, Flora. You see, she looks on the hospital in a sense as hers——”

“Good gracious, on what grounds?” indignantly demanded Flora.

“Flood, my dear,” was the laconic answer. “Triton's Flood, and, I suppose, to a large degree, Flood's Triton. Poor Amelia; she professes to despise her family and to deplore their former grandeurs, but if I dared accuse her of a thoroughly unchristian thought, I'd say she's gratified at playing this trick on them. I must say they've treated her and Michal very badly.”

“Well, but——”

“She means no harm by her tract-reading, and I think the patients will just have to put up with her; in fact, it may even do some of them good.”

“That girl they call Polly Hawkins—she certainly uses the most terrible language sometimes,” admitted Flora.

“Oh, we've got to get used to that. I'm not concerned with their morals, Flora! I want to get their bodies sound and healthy, and after that Amelia and 'the brethren' can have their way. Are the nurses satisfactory?”

“Two of them are very good; I don't think Mrs. Umbridge is going to be much use—she's so clumsy; and—I don't want to tell tales, but she's always running off to the house, where the men are working——”

“We'll get rid of her. So the men are still working at the house?”

“That's what I really came to see you about, ma'am. Of course, Mrs. Umbridge is a shocking gossip, and I'm afraid she's a bit of a troublemaker as well; but I must say she startled me to-day——”

“Well?” asked Pallas, as Flora paused.

“She says the men have got their orders to make the house ready for occupation. They're expecting workmen down from London, and there's a lot of ill-feeling; you know what we feel here, with unemployment so bad, about the importation of foreigners. I couldn't help worrying about it a little,” confessed Flora, “so after I locked up I went round by the front of the

house, just to have a look, and, oh, ma'am, I did have a shock! for all the windows are wide open, and there's bedding airing across the sills."

Pallas paused for a moment before speaking—more calmly than she felt.

"There's no need to worry; it would be quite impossible now for them to evict us without giving us proper notice. I have written clearly to the solicitors all that I was doing, and it is they who are responsible, for having taken no steps to prevent me. It may be some of the Barbados Floods who are paying Bristol a visit; in which case I am sure I shall have no difficulty in pleading our cause. I've got a more immediate worry than that, Flora; the appointment of a night watchman is not settled—I had no idea I should have such difficulty in finding what I want."

"What about old Bowling?"

"That's not a bad idea," conceded Pallas, having considered it. "But if he accepts employment and a regular wage he must give up his dwelling in the almshouses; is he likely to do that, do you think?"

"There would be no harm in asking."

"And he must be very old; older, a deal, than he looks. Is it an old man's employ, that all-night watching?"

"Perhaps not. . . ."

"Your father has always been sympathetic to our effort, has he not? Do pray, Flora, ask him if there is not any one among his late workmen whom he can recommend to look after the place at night."

Flora was about to agree, when the door opened, and both women rose quickly as Lord Edward came in, unannounced.

"Edward! There's nothing the matter, is there, at Paragon?"

He shook his head, but his expression was so grave that Pallas turned at once to dismiss her visitor. Something must be wrong, for Edward to come thus, uninvited and unheralded, at an hour so late that the return to Paragon must be made long after nightfall. Her mind leapt at once to the conclusion that he had heard something about Triton; that he had come to break bad news to her, which she stiffened herself to resist.

"Beaufort has arrived."

Flora still stood there, embarrassed, wondering at what moment to make her curtsy and depart.

"Has he? Oh, how pleased you all must be. That is all for this evening, my dear. This is Miss Wardell, Edward, sister of the Miss Mary Ann Wardell Rory has at Paragon; she is being a great help to me at Triton."

With his usual kindly courtesy, Lord Edward shook the hand of the blushing girl, who hurriedly made her adieux; the door closed behind her.

"She is a niece, you know, of Richard Peddy; she has just brought me a most extraordinary tale." Pallas told him of the Liverpool rumour. "Do you think there can be any truth in it at all, Edward?"

"I should not be surprised; it's been rumoured for some time that the Bristol traders are finding means of safeguarding their financial interests. You know, I said a long time ago that until the Bill was passed we should only succeed in driving the trade underground, instead of stopping it. You can't expect them to leave their Liverpool rivals to scoop the pool, while any profits remain to be had out of slaving!"

"But think of the ruin to his reputation, if this comes out!"

Lord Edward smiled, shaking his head.

"You must at least credit our friend Peddy with taking every precaution. I admit it's a dangerous rumour, and if it once takes hold on the public imagination, he will have to make a run for it; but I am sure you will find that he has arranged matters with such skill that it will be next to impossible to bring anything home to him. If Peddy's in the game, others are in as well, and they'll have their own combine for self-protection. I think I should not risk burning my fingers by meddling in that pie!"

"Do you mean you'd let them get away with such infamy?" she demanded indignantly.

"No use in moving until the law is on our side." He sank into the chair which she indicated, passing his hands over his face with a gesture of extreme fatigue which, even in her distraction, did not escape her attention.

"How tired you are, Edward! You must stay and sup with me; don't tell me you have other business in Bristol at this hour of the evening."

"I think," he said, looking up at her affectionately, "that you have heard."

"I've heard nothing that is to be believed."

"Well, are you ready to fight for Triton?"

"To the last fence."

He smiled.

"I don't know that it will be necessary. But the house is going to be occupied, at least temporarily."

"What have you heard?"

"It is a strange story. Will you not sit to hear it?"

He had talked at length with Beaufort, and the result of their conversation was this visit to Pallas. He could not leave her to hear the news from strangers. So now he told her about the sequence of events in which Beaufort had become involved in Madrid, and of his journey across northern Spain, as escort to the fugitive party.

"Are they engaged?" Poor Orry! she was thinking, although she wondered why Edward interrupted the flow of their conversation to tell her all this, which was so far away from her present anxieties.

Lord Edward shook his head.

"Beaufort does not discuss the matter; but if our fears are justified, I think the question of marriage will not arise."

"Fears?" She pounced on the word.

"It seems," said Lord Edward, "that the señorita de Lorcha must be the granddaughter of Matthew Flood."

He saw her close her eyes, sway in her chair and catch at its clawed arms with her hands; at the next moment she was waving aside his solicitude.

"I understand. It is she who is coming to live at Triton."

"Hardly to live. I understand it is only a visit: that she has expressed a natural curiosity to see the home of her English ancestors, and that she may stay a month or so. The señorita has her family in Cuba, to which, later, she is bound to return—at least, so I imagine. Unless, of course, she forms ties in England——"

"Beaufort?" Her eyes questioned him.

A shaft of tenderness and understanding swept between them.

"I have never, as you know, pretended to understand my second son. We

have never, any of us, been in his confidence, and he does not confide in us now." He sighed heavily. "I imagine there is an understanding of some kind between him and Miss de Lorcha; but, from my little knowledge of Beaufort, I cannot think he is contemplating marriage. Orabella is less certain; indeed, she is in a pitiful state of distress about the matter. I wish I knew how to comfort her."

"But why should she distress herself? Beaufort is bound to marry some day. Now, if it had been Lionel——!"

"If I were not confident of Beaufort, and positive that he would take no step that might prejudice his career," said Lord Edward, "do you not think that I should be troubled?"

"But how should such a marriage harm him? The Floods are an excellent family; granted there's no aristocracy about them, but you didn't marry an aristocrat, Edward!" She smiled at him. "I suppose they aren't even gentry, though Matthew's mother was a Miss Merlyn, and the Merlyns think a lot of themselves; but they have an old and honourable name, and their lineage is as ancient as your own. There must be plenty of money——"

"Ah, my dear," he interrupted her, "we aren't thinking about Floods."

"Then——"

"There is the distaff side, isn't there?"

She drew a sharp breath.

"I see. Of course I had forgotten."

"It is almost certain," he said heavily, "that Beaufort will be my heir."

"Poor little Perry; is he no stronger? I thought Aurora spoke more hopefully, last time she was here?"

"She is his mother; I suppose she finds it necessary to hope. Pallas, my dear, I am sorry to be the bearer of such ill news."

"What I cannot understand," she said, "is why no one has communicated with me? The firm in London—they should surely have let me know that the house was to be occupied. If people are coming from a distance there will be coaches, horses, outdoor servants; is it my responsibility to find accommodation for them? I suppose so, since I've commandeered their proper quarters."

"How is your hospital going?"

"We sadly need more helpers. It's difficult to find women of the type I want to work in the wards: neither too young nor too old, sober and sensible, with their wits about them, willing and kindly, capable sometimes of exerting discipline—for our patients are not all gentle and biddable! I daren't offer high wages, for, apart from the consideration of means, that would attract the kind I want to avoid. I'm already having to get rid of one of them, and that leaves us with one only for each of the three wards, a cook and a scrubwoman; you can't say we're overstaffed!"

"I'll see what I can do to help you. By the way, I read your letter in the *Journal*."

"What did you think of it?"

"An essay in the gentle art of making enemies!"

"Oh, my dear Edward, I have already so many of those," she said wearily, "that a few more or less cannot matter."

"Nevertheless I agree with every word of it. Our prisons and our asylums are a scandal, but I am not sure the time is ripe to attack them."

"Surely the moment of discovery is the moment for attack!"

He shook his head.

"Not always. We're loaded with troubles, Pallas; not only in Bristol, but throughout the length and breadth of the country. The political situation is chaotic, and it's no moment for introducing new legislative measures, without which, as you know, nothing of importance can be accomplished. The problem in most of our minds is how to feed the people; I'm afraid you will not gain much support for your attack on the housing of lunatics."

"Then I shall have to go on alone."

"What a stormy petrel you are."

She looked at him haggardly.

"And I suppose even you would not believe how little stormy I feel. Time's going on, Edward; I shan't be able to fight much longer. But I must do what little I can, while the power is in me."

He understood; he raised her hand to his lips, then covered it tenderly with his own.

"You are a brave and gallant creature."

"No, I'm not, Edward," she answered quickly. "It hasn't all been charity, you know; it has been a way of running away from myself."

CHAPTER VII

I

ONCE more Bristol was aflame with gossip, the old Flood scandal was again in full spate; it ran in garbled versions from door to door, it gathered impetus from the tangled memories of gaffers and gamblers who could dimly recall the chief protagonists. The cockfight, the death and funeral of Hercules Flood, the great lawsuit brought by Jason Flood against his nephew, which was abruptly terminated by the death of the plaintiff, the triumphal entry of Matthew Flood into his brief enjoyment of his inheritance—all these revived like a fairy tale; their echoes even penetrated the miserable lodging in which lived the old Misses Flood, nursing their poverty: Miss Amelia, tall, gaunt and relentless as ever in the prosecution of evildoers, Miss Michal drifting day by day a little deeper into the dark forest of delusion through which, poor soul, she sought her vanished wits. The news of Triton came to them by way of the chatter of a sly, prying landlady, who despised the two helpless old sisters, and openly disbelieved in the legend of their poverty. "Mean as church mice, that's what they are; mean as what their parents was before 'em." She spread tales of locked boxes in Miss Amelia's cupboard, and hinted at the weight of the golden guineas she swore they contained. If weather or ill-health prevented the old ladies from doing their shopping, she would not supply them with so much as a spoonful of tea without being paid for it.

"Amelia! Amelia!" Miss Michal fluttered into the parlour, where Miss Amelia sat reading her Bible. Her sight was almost gone; in order to read the small print she had to press the Book and her forehead close against the panes of the small window, which, owing to the building opposite, let hardly any light into the dank and cheerless room. "Amelia, have you heard? Triton is being opened up!"

"What has it to do with us?" asked Miss Amelia harshly.

"They must be coming back—all our rich relations! We shall once again be important people in Bristol!"

"'Once again'? When were we ever important in Bristol?" acidly demanded her sister. But Miss Michal was too excited to be quelled by acidity.

"I dare say we shall leave this horrid little hovel and take a good house on College Green, or perhaps in Queen Square," she babbled. "No, I don't think I want to live in the Square again, do you, Amelia? I don't want to be reminded of Papa and Mama, and all that sort of thing. But we must prepare to receive them!"

"To receive who?"

"Our cousins," confidently declared Miss Michal. "We are the only Floods left in Bristol, and it will devolve on us to welcome them to the family mansion! Dear me, how long it is since I was in society! I shall be quite nervous."

"You have *never* been in society, Michal," heavily returned Miss Amelia.

Miss Michal looked sly, put her head on one side and batted her eyelids. None but she knew of the brightly coloured imaginative past she had woven out of her thwarted longings, and she was not now going to satisfy Amelia's curiosity and invite her crushing denials.

"You don't know everything, Amelia! I can assure you there was a time when I was very gay—very gay indeed," she answered reproachfully.

"You had better go to your room, Michal, and ask God's pardon for your untruths."

"I will go to my room, but I think I will not, for the present, trouble God," returned Miss Michal, and dropped a little curtsey as she went from the room.

She was almost deliriously happy as she tiptoed up the stairs and turned the key in the door of the bedroom she shared with her sister. The more her wits failed her the happier grew Miss Michal: as though in her dark forest she had come upon magical glades of sheer gaiety which did not exist in the dull world of actual fact where Amelia inhabited.

Going clumsily on her knees, she dragged from under the bed a small, locked chest to which no one but herself possessed a key. Amelia kept everything locked up and never allowed her (Michal) a peep; so she herself had started this little chest as a protest and in order to annoy Amelia, who would never willingly allow her to have a secret of her own. For a long time it had been empty, but as time went on it had filled itself with a weird collection.

Whispering to herself with pleasure, Miss Michal opened it, crooning with delight over its contents. Some of them were stolen: woollen bobbles wrenched from the upholstery of chairs, bits of old sealing-wax, a skein of coloured wool. But the majority had been begged from Pallas. They never visited St. Michael's Hill without Miss Michal's making an opportunity to whisper: "You are going to give me something, aren't you, for my little box?"—and Pallas, understanding that this was one of poor Michal's secrets, would find a flower, or a tassel, or a piece of ribbon, which Miss Michal would smuggle away in the pocket of her gown.

"A reception—that means elegance," she was whispering, as she scratched like a little dog through her motley store. Presently she found her hat, a limp platter of weather-beaten silk, with knots of frayed ribbon, and, with the help of her pincushion, proceeded to transform it. Chattering softly with glee, she loaded it with every conceivable object that the chest contained; she piled flower on flower and tassel on feather until it resembled a cone, or a Christmas tree loaded with favours. The result filled her with ecstasy. This was surely the *ne plus ultra* of fashionable folly! She thrilled to think of the impression it would make on the company before which she proposed to wear it.

Suddenly the handle of the door was sharply turned. Miss Michal laughed.

"You can't come in."

"Open this door instantly, Michal!"

She clung to her defiance for a few frightened moments, but the habit of obedience was too strong. Well, Amelia could be as angry as she liked; she could not hope to rival such a hat. It would be quite amusing to see her jealousy. Miss Michal rose and flung open the door.

"Michal Flood!"

Miss Amelia stood there, and behind her the landlady; Michal remembered suddenly that it was the day when she came for her rent.

"Oh, lud! Oh, la!" The woman half-smothered her coarse laughter with grimy fingers, while Miss Amelia advanced grimly into the room.

"Take that vanity from off your head, Michal!"

"I have trimmed it myself to wear at the reception." Miss Michal bridled. "I am sure no London headgear is more fashionable——" She broke off with a little scream as Miss Amelia tore the hat from her head.

With her long, bony fingers, paying no attention to her sister's feeble attack, she proceeded to rend Miss Michal's handiwork to pieces. The landlady's brutal guffaws echoed across the threshold.

Miss Michal began to whimper, the helpless, heart-rending whimpering of an ill-used child; then suddenly she stopped. She looked slyly behind her at the dressing-chest on which lay, open, the *étui* in which Miss Amelia kept her sewing materials. All the hatred she had felt for Amelia since they were girls flamed up in her heart and, snatching the stiletto from its bed of velvet, she bounded forward and drove it into her sister's shoulder. The landlady's guffaws became ear-shattering screams; Miss Amelia gave an exclamation and sat down heavily in a chair.

II

At the very moment when this painful scene was going on, a travelling coach, with four handsome horses, passed through Lawford's Gate and made its impressive way between the stalls of the Old Market. It was the busiest hour of the forenoon, and the noise was deafening, the venders crying their wares up to the very doors of the coach itself; more than once a brown, skinny arm, a hand with a fistful of ripe codlings or a living, flapping fish was thrust through the open window of the coach, much to the amusement of its occupants, but these intrusions were suddenly checked by the arrival of two horsemen who, using their crops to clear the way, galloped up, one on either side of the coach, and were recognized by the crowd which drew back and returned, albeit half-heartedly, to its occupation among the stalls.

"We should have been with you before," Beaufort was saying, as he bent to speak through the window, "but Lionel's horse went lame and we were obliged to hire another."

"And this is Bristol!"

Her heart was in her throat; she was so excited that, had she been alone, she would have sprung from the coach to set foot upon the soil of her forefathers. There was a sort of splendour about her that took even Beaufort's breath away; he, the chilly gentleman, was not given to emotions, but at the sight of María Pía de Lorcha his heart missed a beat.

In Madrid her looks had been indisputable; they had matched with the elaborate architecture, with the rich, dark colouring of apartments, with the deep exoticism of the national type. But here, on the English landscape, she was like some gorgeous outrage; he recognized, not wholly with pleasure, that wherever she went she was going to create a furore.

For her arrival in what, to Madame Deschamps, she persisted in describing

as her native city, María Pía had dressed herself with the utmost magnificence; she wore what *La Belle Assemblée* describes as "a carriage costume" of violet crêpe over satin, with five fluted flounces of crêpe at the hem; the bodice was of velvet, with sleeves and corsage ornaments of the greatest elaboration, rising to a triple ruff under her chin, and her high-crowned bonnet was loaded with cypress plumes that matched her gown. She had also insisted, with great indiscretion, on wearing her finest jewels, which she had managed to conceal in the flight from Madrid; the lobes of her ears were weighted with immense diamonds, a star of diamonds and rubies blazed at her throat, and she wore over the fingers of her violet chamois gloves a multiplicity of rings. It was all quite in order, according to Havanese standards, and one may take for granted that "*La Bellísima Negra*" would have enjoyed this entrance, although she would have regretted the coach, and demanded the *volante* for the better display of her magnificence.

Beaufort, however, that past master of the conventions, shrank a little. It was their first meeting since he had learned of her coloured blood and, in his hypersensitive mood, it seemed to speak in her every gesture, in the gleaming, fluid orb of her long-lashed eyes, in the deep, amber tone of her skin—which he had formerly taken for granted as the skin of a creole. She wore her gloves; he could not see the bluish tinge of her nails, but he was conscious of it as though she had flourished them before him.

He bent to speak to her in Spanish.

"*Amiga mía*, I should for the present draw the curtains. This population is barbarian; it is not wise to attract too much attention."

"Draw the curtains! But I must see everything! No, no, I will not draw the curtains."

Lionel, riding on the other side of the coach, heard the strong, clear voice, with the vibrant quality that seems to belong to dwellers in the sun, to the spice-lands, to all imagined scenes in which figure blue waters and the waving of palms. It was an exciting voice; he hoped that the señorita de Lorcha knew other languages as well as her native Spanish; he could, he thought, manage a conversation in French if his vis-à-vis were not too rapid or too idiomatic. He could not see her, and he could catch only a glimpse of the dove-grey taffeta gown of the other occupant of the coach, whom he knew, from Beaufort's brief descriptions, as the chaperon, Madame Deschamps. He rode quietly at the wheel, awaiting his introduction. As they reached Peter Street he heard Beaufort give a sharp order.

"Bear right and drive up through Wine Street and Broad Street."

Avoiding the Bridge, and the matchless view of the river and Backs that showed from the juncture of Maryport with the High Street! Surely that was a view to show a stranger? Catching his brother's eye across the roof of the coach, Lionel was about to protest, when a voice came ringing from the interior:

"*Madre mía!* But there are ships!"

"Yes," answered Beaufort shortly, cursing the traffic which had brought them to a momentary standstill where Peter Street crossed one of the many alleys leading down to the river. "A very foul, evil-smelling region and full of vagrants. We shall soon be in the better part of the town."

"But I must see the ships! I must see the place from which my grand-

father set out on his voyage to our country!" She was so emphatic in her insistence that Beaufort knew the uselessness of dispute, and sullenly told the coachman to bear left after reaching St. Peter's Church. They drove down on to the narrow strip of wharf that ran between the Old Mint and the Bridge; by now a small crowd was following them.

The broad, grey loop of Avon was on their left, with its busy traffic of small craft; after the noble sweep and the crowded animation of Havana harbour it seemed strangely quiet and dull to María Pía. For a moment she felt a pang of disappointment, then the unfamiliarity of the scene recaptured her: the curious little houses, with their steeply sloping, rose-red roofs and small, bowed fronts, the low colour-key in which the scene was pitched, the odd sleepy emptiness, to which a frapped-up war-hulk, anchored in midstream, in some way contributed, gave her a sensation of being on the threshold of a dream.

"Tell him to stop!"

"It would not be prudent; we should be overrun with beggars."

"Señor, I must be permitted to do as I wish, now I have come to my own home!"

"*Ma chère*, it is better you should take monsieur's advice, we can visit the quays on some future occasion," said Madame Deschamps.

Hearing the French, and understanding that the señorita wanted to stop, Lionel rode forward and spoke to the coachman; the coach drew up and was at once the centre of a crowd of mendicants.

"Spare a penny, fine ladies and gentlemen, for the poor blind!" "Alms, alms for the lame." "Spare a penny, lords and ladies, to a poor honest sailorman that's given an arm and a leg to his country!"

"Why did you halt us?" Beaufort spoke furiously to his brother across the top of the coach.

"Because the señorita desired it," said Lionel, riding easily round to the other side. "You at least have the opportunity to present me." To still the clamour, he plunged his hand in his pocket and flung a shower of small coins among the beggars, who started to grovel and scuffle for them.

"*Muchas gracias, señor!*"

"God, what a subject to paint!" was his first reaction when he saw the head and shoulders framed in the window of the coach. Like lightning came the second thought—that he had not enough experience to do justice to it, and that, dismissed, gave place to an emotion which, in that first stabbing thrill of encounter, Lionel was unable to analyse. He felt his heart swell up and rap against his ribs, and found himself breathing quickly as he descended for Beaufort's sullen presentation.

"It is my youngest brother, Lionel; he speaks no Spanish."

"*Mais je parle—un peu—le français*," stammered Lionel, praying heaven she would understand him.

After one quick glance she had lowered her lashes.

"*Mais c'est charmant, que vous parlez français, monsieur*," she said in her ugly, Spanish-French accent, which he found beautiful on account of the timbre of her voice. "*Faites-moi le faveur d'ouvrir la porte; je voudrais me promener un peu.*"

Ignoring the protests of Beaufort and of Madame Deschamps, Lionel gave

her his hand to descend. From the point of view of the ignorant onlooker, he might have been in love with her, so intense was the look, so reverent the gesture; but Lionel's reverence was the reverence of the artist for the better-than-beautiful, the supremely paintable. He stammered: "*Mademoiselle, Goya aurait dû peindre votre portrait,*" as he looked at her, standing as though painted upon the faint Bristol scene; the very atmosphere seemed to fade around her as though she gathered all colour, all light and shadow into her strong, glowing face, into the shining darkness of her brows, the blue-white flash of her teeth. He was at one moment ready to die with the sense of his own impotence, at the next prepared to work himself to the bone in order, some day, to convey María Pía de Lorcha to canvas. He thought of his palette, and there seemed no colours there that could truthfully portray her; well, they must be found or, if necessary, invented. The great masters had ground their own pigments, had discovered for themselves the secrets of their profound blues and reds, their pearly flesh tones. . . . He must talk to Bird about it.

Yet, enchanted as he was by this inimitable spectacle, Lionel was not oblivious of the fact that it had captured other eyes than his: that from the direction of the Bridge and High Street feet were hurrying, voices crying summons to others to hasten and not miss the rare sight to be seen on the quay.

"*Il vaut mieux remonter, mademoiselle,*" he told her shyly, and caught Beaufort's look, half of annoyance, half of relief, as her hand again touched his in mounting the steps of the coach. Well, it was Beaufort's fault for ordering him to accompany him; why had he done it? It was discretion or it was the desire that she should feel that her welcome to Bristol came, not from him alone but from other members of his family. What was going to happen about the rest—about Paragon, to which he had evidently given her to understand she would be welcome? An awkward situation for Beaufort; and who would have expected a cold fish like Beau to fall in love in such a fashion—if it was love?

María Pía leaned back in her corner. Her heart was beating very quickly; she told herself it was the excitement of arriving in Bristol. She was on her way to the house overlooking two rivers, and the little ghost of María Cayetuña was beside her. "*Muñeca-mama,*" she murmured; but the ghost drew delicately back as though it had been ousted by the bright, ardent gaze of a pair of light-grey eyes, by a pale sunbrowned skin. "*Muñeca-mama.*" No; she had not bargained for this.

III

"I fear I make but an indifferent cicerone," said Beaufort, as they came to the end of their inspection of the principal rooms. He himself had been interested against his will; he had not expected, in a merchant's house, to come upon such evidence of taste and knowledge. The family portraits, at which he had been prepared to laugh, were, for the most part, highly presentable; there were two fair Knellers, an excellent Lely. This was not an *arriviste* establishment, as he had imagined; the main staircase, with the

whole of its walls decorated, from barely visible dome to ground, with carved sprays and birds by Grinling Gibbons, was finer than any he had seen, they had nothing like it at Badminton. But he was much put out by the absence of Pallas, on whom he had taken the trouble to call, begging her, since Orabella washed her hands of the whole affair, to assist him in receiving the young foreigner and establishing her in the lodging she had chosen—mercifully—in preference to his proffered hospitality of Paragon.

Pallas for once had not rallied to her nephew's support. She had even—most unlike her elf—been evasive; but Beaufort, accustomed to feminine evasiveness, had not taken her evasions seriously. She did not, she said, feel it was her place to welcome Miss de Lorcha to a house with which she had no connections save, indeed, the dubious one of having commandeered some of its outbuildings for purposes of her own! On this matter she was bound to call upon the young chatelaine of Triton, explain, and if possible excuse herself, and try by every means in her power to secure Miss de Lorcha's sympathetic support of her charitable scheme. "It is unfortunate I don't talk Spanish!" she commented, with her wry smile.

"I do not doubt you will make yourself understood, aunt. I have begun to teach the señorita a little English; though she speaks none herself, she can already follow to some extent a conversation between other people. Moreover," said Beaufort stiffly, "she speaks fluent French."

"In that language," said Pallas dryly, "I fear I am as little likely to do you credit. I read French occasionally for my own pleasure, but I have not spoken it since my days at school. In fact, I think you would do well to find someone else to do your welcoming for you; if you want to create an impression, dear Beau, you can surely do better than an old Bristol bumpkin like myself?"

He frowned, for he did not take kindly to teasing.

"There is no question of creating an impression," he said, with something less than his usual tact; Pallas marked the lapse and smothered a smile. Beaufort must indeed be disturbed when he forgot to be a courtier! "In the absence of her own relations, it would seem a little melancholy if no one were here to greet the señorita de Lorcha on her arrival."

"She has relations in Bristol, but I'm afraid their presence would not add to the gaiety of the occasion," observed Pallas. "That's an introduction that had better come later; perhaps I will arrange it. Amelia may know something about the house and its contents which will interest her young kinswoman. Have you any idea how long she proposes to stay?"

"None whatever. I was completely taken by surprise when she told me of her decision to visit Triton Lodge."

And relief, thought Pallas, remembering her conversation with Edward Sax. "Well, my dear," she concluded aloud, "as you know, I am a busy woman, and can bind myself to no engagements that may interfere with my proper duties. If Miss de Lorcha arrives at an hour when I am in the hospital, you may send word to me; if not, I fear our meeting will have to be postponed to some other moment. You may, if you will, speak to her of me, and say that I shall call on her to explain my act of trespass."

From this unsatisfactory attitude he had failed to drive her, and although, immediately on arrival, he had sent Lionel round to the erstwhile stables,

the latter had returned saying that Miss Burmester had not been seen there that day. Beaufort was offended; he felt that all his family—including Lionel, by his behaviour on the quay—were letting him down.

"I will now leave you," he said, for, not insensitive despite his coldness, he felt a certain reserve in her, which he put down partly to weariness after her journey, partly to her desire to be alone, to digest her new surroundings.

María Pía drew a long breath, and the colour came back into her cheeks, which had grown very pale. For the last two hours she had held herself in an almost intolerable control; she could not surrender to her excitement in front of Beaufort, whose chilly manner made the betrayal of emotion seem like an indecency. Native prudence and her upbringing warned her not to pay overmuch attention to the other—the younger one—whose eyes followed her with so strange, intent, yet impersonal a fixation. She was not used to being looked at like that; there was no doubt about the admiration, but it seemed to be addressed to some part of herself that she did not know about, and it troubled and at the same time excited her. She locked both her trouble and excitement away behind a façade of proud self-confidence which, God knows, she was far from feeling.

She had gone coldly, as in a dream, from room to room, repressing her desire to ask a thousand questions—how, indeed, could he have answered them?—enthralled, a little awed by this strange, British mansion, by the dark ancestral eyes which followed her from their tarnished frames. Her spirit strove for contacts which it did not achieve. "Where is the *patio*?" she asked, and was told that in England there are no *patios*. Consciousness of her alien blood sank deeply, like a shaft, into her interior; for in Spain and its colonies the *patio* is the soul of the house, the centre of all its intimacies, its social nexus and the scene of all its principal activities. How can one live in a house without a *patio*?

Seeking her reflection in the dark surfaces of polished wood, she wanted—and restrained herself—to lay her hands on them: to feel through the mellowed wood of centuries the touch of her ancestors, through the objects they had handled. This is the china from which they ate; this silver is thin from their usage. Their feet have worn the polish from these thresholds, and these stairs were clipped by their high heels.

"Deschamps. Tell me it's true—that I'm not dreaming."

"I, at least, don't feel it is a dream, after all the miles we have travelled," said Madame Deschamps, smiling.

"From London? *Vaya!* What is that beside our travels in Spain?" she retorted, with reason. She looked about her a little wildly, like a child that does not know where to start its adventures. "Nothing like this has ever happened to me: a whole house—my own—to do with as I please. Is it like what you imagined? Is it as beautiful?" She seemed to seek assurance.

"It is indeed a very handsome place. Your ancestors, *ma chère*, had very good taste and the means to gratify it."

"Deschamps." She drew closer to her companion, and the Frenchwoman, with one of her rare impulses towards demonstration, put her arm about her; she could feel the girl trembling. "I have such very strange feelings . . . As if there were no one left in the world beside myself!"

"*Comment?*"

"No more Floods—no one to use all this—but me. But how am I to use it? I don't even know the meaning of half the things—there is not a book of which I can read a single word: I do not know the names of one of these people from whom I am descended. Perhaps one of them is my grandfather—and I don't even know that!"

"We shall find out all those things presently; there must be people in Bristol who can tell you all you want to know—although," confessed Madame Deschamps, "heaven knows how we shall manage to converse with them! I find a very odd linguistic ignorance among *ces anglais*; even in London very few of the people to whom we were presented could speak anything but their native tongue." She spoke matter-of-factly, to combat the tenebrous mood she felt upon the girl.

"In this room—perhaps sitting in this very chair—my grandfather——" She seemed to struggle with imagination.

"Do you not wish to rest?"

María Pía waived the suggestion impatiently.

"And my grandmother—my grandmother——"

"*Mais non, ma chérie*; your grandmother was never here."

"Of course not. I know. She was in her own country—thousands and thousands of miles away. And they had never even thought of each other, yet they were to meet—to meet—and Mama was to be born. . . . It's all calm here and so tranquil, like a beautifully tamed animal; look, even, at the line of those hills: could anything be less like our Cordilleras? Pale, pale and calm. No voices are raised, there is no singing; all the time you can hear yourself breathe! Do you remember, as we were coming, Deschamps, there was no one in the plantations? Do the crops here grow by themselves? I suppose I shall get used to it and to all this flat, quiet greenness that seems to come right into the house; all the looking-glasses are filled with trees. I shall smother in green!" Her long neck swung wildly above the ruff which she thrust down with her hands and, having cast her bonnet aside, her hair was disordered.

Within an hour, however, she was leaping up and down the stairs, bringing this, that or the other object to show to her dueña—Madame Deschamps being engaged with the two frightened French refugee servants they had brought with them from London in unpacking the small amount of luggage they had acquired in town. She already foresaw the tremendous practical difficulties they were due to encounter in attempting to run a *ménage* on the scale demanded by Triton with their total ignorance of the language. The Frenchman and his wife, who had come over originally in the service of *aristo* refugees from the Terror, already complained of the hostility of the English housekeeper and cook who had installed themselves by the orders of the solicitors in London. This Bristol visit was, to Madame Deschamps, the wildest of the many escapades in which attendance on her charge had so far involved her, and she was filled with the gravest misgivings as to its outcome. Why had not *ce monsieur* redeemed his original promise of entertaining them at his parents' *château* in the country? Madame Deschamps was an astute woman; she guessed the reason, but until she established the correctness of her surmise, she would not speak of it to María Pía. She prayed, however, that their sojourn in Bristol might be a short one,

and she had secretly written at length to Santiago, urging him to use all his authority to command María Pía's return home.

So María Pía wandered from room to room, finding and vainly trying to place traces of bygone occupation. To whom had belonged these mysterious instruments which, she believed, had something to do with ships? Who was the collector of the many maps with which the entire walls of one small room were lined? There was no one to tell her that this had been Hercules' office, where he sat with his sea captains and discussed the fortunes of his ships whose courses were traced across those blue seas with their curving dolphins and spouting whales. The great leather-bound volumes, one of which she dragged from its shelf, and rejected impatiently on finding that no line of the crabbed brown script or column of figures was legible, were the records of his partnership with John Peddy and Thomas Shergill; ships and slaves and merchandise all mixed up in a fashion that none but their owners could have deciphered. She dragged open a drawer, and fingered with curiosity a selection of various spurs and little tasselled hoods which she recognized as belonging to the equipment of cocking; and there were jack-boots and rusted guns and valueless paraphernalia—all masculine—which baffled and annoyed her; had no woman, before her coming, ever occupied this house?

She opened cupboards out of which flew clouds of moths, and the garments in which they had feasted crumbled at her touch; she opened boxes, and the festering remnants of full-bottomed wigs made her recoil. What ruin time had made. Well, these things were hers to destroy. . . . She suddenly remembered the mirador and wondered whether Santiago was keeping his word; whether he remembered sometimes to let the sun and the air have their way with all those precious relics belonging to a time already so distant as to seem part of another life. The tragic violence of the Spanish episode seemed to have cut her life in twain; had driven the Cuban half so far back within her consciousness that it had no influence over her present actions. In Triton a new life offered itself—if grudgingly; some means must be found of grasping it. Here it waited—remote behind its English barrier; she could feel its challenge and something within herself—some spirit of *conquistadores*—which responded.

The weakness and uncertainty caused by the shock of arrival had gone before the night; only remained the excitement of adventure, and the need to bolster the evidently doubtful spirit of Madame Deschamps.

"*Voyons*, they were interesting people, these Floods! Do you not feel it? These maps, these pictures of ships and of foreign countries—it proves they were interested in travel and, no doubt, in commerce. There are books filled with accounts—like Papa's books about the ranch; I must find out about it all. And what's happened to the business which made us so rich? Perhaps that might be revived." Her eyes darkened with conjecture; her chin rested on her clenched right hand as she sprawled in the chair opposite to Madame Deschamps—the chair which had been Hercules' favourite.

"It was said in Cuba that your grandfather was a slave trader," Madame Deschamps reminded her, and she nodded as though the reminder gave her satisfaction.

"There's plenty to be made out of slave trading, though Beaufort said—

didn't he?—that there is a lot of agitation against it in England. Why? The plantations have to be kept up, don't they? It will be very awkward if a law is passed against slaving, it will make slaves very expensive. I suppose as there seem to be no negroes in England that people don't realise it; we must make them understand."

"I think you should change your dress," Madame Deschamps pointed out. "We must take care of our clothes, for they will probably have to last a long time. You were very extravagant, *ma chère*, in choosing that blue silk!"

María Pfa jerked her head impatiently.

"Let me tell you, it is very false economy not to make a good impression when you come to a new place! And we have to meet the people at Paragon, don't we?" The thought pierced her that she had already met one of them; had not the new gown already justified itself in helping to bring that look into the eyes of Beaufort Sax's young brother? "I will not have us economize, Deschamps; why should we? There is plenty of money, it is only a matter of waiting. And we can arrange for plenty of credit, now we are in Bristol. I begin to realize, now I have seen this place, what it means to be a Flood. It is nearly as good as being a *de Lorcha* in Havana!"

"I do not take so lightly this matter of indebtedness to Monsieur Sax, and, what is more," added Madame Deschamps, through compressed lips, "I have an impression he does not take it so lightly either."

"*Madre mia*, what do his ideas matter? We've given him sufficient securities; those English lawyers were able to vouch for Papa's position in Cuba."

"He may not be in a position to stand out of so much money; it struck me that he looked uneasy when you explained that our letters of credit were valueless on English banks."

"I think you imagine, my dear Deschamps; in any case, the English firm has agreed, on the strength of the letters, to give us a small allowance monthly—a stingy one, to my way of thinking, but we shall manage when we have arranged with the tradesfolk here. We must lose no time in finding those Bristol Floods; I think it was very odd of them not to be here to welcome us." She cast a quick, sidelong glance at her companion. "They are jealous, perhaps, that I have the house? It would be natural. But it must not be allowed to remain like that: they must be made to understand that while I am here, all, all are welcome, if they bear the name of Flood, or have our blood in their veins."

Was she not deluding herself, Madame Deschamps questioned painfully. It had been something to discover that the house itself was not a chimera, that it had actual stone-and-wood dimension, outside of its owner's imagination. Undoubtedly María Pfa was its owner; the lawyers had admitted it, when once she had succeeded in proving her identity. But, foreigner as she was, Madame Deschamps felt instinctively that mere flesh and blood ownership would not give her the standing among these cold, possessive English which she evidently expected.

María Pfa's head had fallen against the back of the chair, her eyes were closed, almost as though she were sleeping; but Madame Deschamps knew from the tensility of the fingers' clasp upon the carvings they covered that her charge was fully awake.

Silence fell, and a long, slow, English twilight; the old house creaked with age about them, seeming with each tiny sound to emphasize its mysterious entity, its doubts of the strangers who had invaded its walls. As it grew dark the silence deepened, but outside, beyond the shrubberies, beyond the high walls of the stableyard, which yet they had not visited, small panes of glass turned orange with candle-light, the hospital went through its quiet bustle of settling for the night and the night watchers came on duty.

In the kitchens of Triton servants complained at having to prepare an evening meal at the unheard-of hour of midnight, and there was much grumbling and covert ill-feeling between the foreign and English factions. Outside, the sky powdered itself with stars, and a few passers-by lifted their heads to stare with surprise at lights in the windows of Triton Lodge.

A figure moved doubtfully along the grass verge that bordered the lily-pond, whose surface of dark steel gleamed clear of the scum which had long since choked the plants. The figure moved cautiously, hesitantly, yet with an air of security, as though familiar with its surroundings, pausing now and again to free the turreted flounces of a gown from the tufts which had escaped the scythe in a hasty reaping.

And so at length it came within sight of "the Peep," whose circular balustrade, broken away at one corner, was palely visible against the darker background of trees; the balustrade from which Hercules Flood had overlooked his two rivers and levelled his spyglass upon the ships that bore his credit and his fortunes across the far seas.

On the balustrade a man was leaning; his back was turned to the intruder, his elbows planted on the stonework. He seemed part of the stillness of the scene, bewitched into immobility by its sheer beauty of night-time. Behind his head a few stars twinkled out in the clear sky, and a lopsided bubble of moon poised delicately on the tip of the tallest tree.

The newcomer paused, uncertain. Who was this unknown? Some person the ladies had brought with them, or some local idler satisfying his curiosity and perhaps some romantic sentiments by trespassing in the grounds? Not that there was any air of trespass about him; there was a serenity of possession in the broad shoulders, the easy posture of the stranger; moreover, under his breath, he was humming a tune. He had handsome legs, though slender, for a man of his height, and they were negligently crossed, the weight of the body thrown on the left, while the right foot rested lightly on its toe—a gentleman's attitude.

Pallas took a step forward, and the rustle of her gown betrayed her. He turned leisurely, unstartled as though he had been expecting someone, drawing himself to his full height. She felt the blood run out of her, her mouth dry up. Full raven curls, black bar of brows, and wide, sensuous mouth: an expression, too, as he saw her, and took a step towards her, of arrogant query—how well she knew that arrogance, and the lift of the brows that accompanied it!

"Then it's true—about the haunting of Triton. Oh, my poor love, can't you rest?"

Then she knew that she, who had never fainted in her life, was going to faint; through a blurring of trees and of grass, which came rushing up towards

her face, she heard someone say in a high, plangent tenor, which, even in that fading minute, she had time to realize was not Matthew's voice:

"*Perdone—?*"

Then there was the sound of a fall, and the voice cried out:

"*Madre mia, quien es? No tenga miedo—n'ayez pas peur—*Deschamps, Deschamps! Here is a lady—fainting—in our garden!"

When Madame Deschamps came running, followed by the French servant who had been helping to arrange the sleeping accommodation for the night, the three of them managed to raise Pallas, who, less unconscious than giddy, struggled back to the quick, angry sound of foreign voices over her head.

"But, María Pía, what are you doing? What have you got on?"

"*Caramba*, I had forgotten. You told me to change my dress: well, I found these things, which perhaps were my grandfather's, in the chest at the top of the stairs. . . ."

CHAPTER VIII

I

"I WON'T put up with this outrage!"

"But what outrage, dear Mama? I——"

"What, then, do you call it? You, with a beautiful home of your own, with every concession, every convenience planned as you want it, have the effrontery to tell me you're going to desert your home and family to live in some disgusting, squalid lodging among common people!"

"The people aren't common, and the lodging happens to be very far from squalid, and rather expensive; in fact, I didn't like telling Papa how expensive it is going to be."

"Don't palter with me, Lionel. So you are merely leaving home because we don't satisfy you!"

Lionel thought: "Why didn't I leave Papa to tell her, as he offered?" But he knew he could not have left his father to deal the blow on which, after many weeks and months of painful indecision, he had at last determined.

"Darling Mama, you know that isn't true; and I shall come home for all my week-ends." He did not wish to, but it was the least concession he could make to her wounded love. "It's no use; I'm not making the progress I ought to. If I'm to go to Mr. Lawrence next spring, I must be at least twice as far advanced as I am at present; I must put in many more hours of work, and I must remove myself from the distractions I'm too weak to resist when I'm at home with all of you." Surely that would please her—the hint that his affection for her made it difficult for him to pay proper attention to his work? She chose, however, to take it in the wrong way.

"I suppose you will next be saying I interrupt you—I, who practically devote myself to your comfort: who watch over you every hour to see that you are not disturbed."

"Ah, Mama," sighed Lionel, and was hardly conscious that he spoke aloud, "it is just that—comfort—which is most ruinous to me."

She stared at him as though she doubted his sanity.

"If you need half-starvation, and squalor, and low society to make an artist of you, Lionel, it's a pity you were born a gentleman! I'm sure there's never been anything in your father's family, or in mine, that should account for your low tastes."

If to love colour like a religion, to have reverence for a line, to feel in one's soul the rhythm of a curve and to rejoice in an effect of symmetry were to have low tastes, Lionel knew he was indicted. He knew also that it was hopeless to explain these things to his mother, so he tried to convince her in a fashion she could understand.

"The room I have found is just off Queen Square—you know that is a very nice part of the town—at the very top of a house that was built in the reign of Queen Anne; it's a long attic, scrupulously clean, with a window that overlooks Redcliff Parade and the whole of the river as far down as Cannon's.

Marsh. There's a north light—a thing you know I've always complained we have not in Paragon——"

"Don't be ridiculous; there are at least a dozen rooms that look to the north."

"Servants' rooms," said Lionel patiently, "with little low windows that only throw light on a corner of the canvas, and no space to get back and look at what you're doing. My attic's at least twenty feet long, and underneath it is my bedroom: as clean and neat a little apartment as even you could wish for. There isn't much furniture, and I'd like to take one or two things with me; a corner cupboard, if you could spare it, and a chest or two—they need not be large ones. I wish, by the way, you would choose me some curtains, for my landlord's taste is not of the best——!"

But the implied compliment did not melt Orabella.

"And what company do you propose to keep in your spare time?" she asked contemptuously.

"Mama dear, don't you understand? There'll be no spare time. As long as daylight lasts I shall be working, and when it's gone I'll sleep like a log; you know what I'm like at home when I'm concentrating on something."

She knew; but the unworthy thought flashed into her mind that Lionel was setting up this *ménage*, so far from his home, to indulge some casual *amour* of which, in his family's presence, he was ashamed. She felt the gripe of jealousy and disgust, and almost flung the accusation in his face, but mercifully controlled the disgraceful impulse. Had she yielded to it, it is doubtful if he would ever have forgiven her; there could have been nothing left of the relationship he strove, even now, to preserve.

When Lord Edward came in she threw herself upon him.

"Edward, you must build a studio for Lionel!"

He showed his surprise.

"Has he not mentioned it? He told me he had found a place in the town."

"You aren't going to allow it, Edward? It's mad—it's ridiculous." She became incoherent in her outraged sense of possession. Lord Edward shook his head.

"We have no right to interfere. Lionel has chosen his career, and if he feels that the conditions with which we have surrounded him are bad for his work, he is right to look for others. Try to accept that, my love; you will be much happier if you cease to struggle against the inevitable."

Finding him implacable, she carried, for once, her troubles to Aurora. She found her daughter-in-law nursing the little boy, whose pale head lay against his mother's bosom; on Perry's wan face was a look of unchildlike patience; so much of his short life had been spent in enduring pain that he had grown to take it for granted; it was Aurora who suffered on his account.

As her mother-in-law entered, she picked up and held out to her a pencil sketch, a startlingly faithful likeness of Perry.

"Lionel has just finished it; isn't it good, Mama?" She pressed her cheek against the child's soft, ruffled head. Her eyes said: "Perhaps it will soon be all I have of him."

Orabella cast a quick, uneasy glance at her grandson, her favourite among the grandchildren; but some self-protective instinct had always kept her from giving too much of her heart to Perry; like Aurora, she accepted the doctors'

assumption that his days on earth were numbered. She asked perfunctorily after the little girls.

"They're out for a walk with Miss Wardell. She is really a great blessing; I'm so grateful to aunt Pallas for finding her for me."

"Well," said Orabella, sitting down, "I only pray you will have less grief from your children than mine have given me!"

"Oh, Mama, I am sure Lionel is as good as gold!"

"Kindly don't speak to me of Lionel." Her lips tightened. "Aurora," she said presently, "does Beaufort ever talk to you?"

Lady Aurora shook her head.

"I don't think he talks to anybody—much."

"I thought he might; you are such a close, discreet——" "Simpleton," she almost added; one of Orabella's small grudges against Peregrine's widow was that she was such dull company, with never anything to gossip about. "I suppose he's visiting his new—flame!" She spat out the word as if it poisoned her.

"I really don't know, Mama."

"You never know anything, Aurora Sax! You have ears, I suppose, like other people? You were with me at Mrs. Cholmondeley's, when every one was talking about the sensation the Spanish creature is creating in Bristol."

"All I know, Mama, is what Lionel tells me; he says Aunt Pallas is being very kind—is looking after her a good deal."

"What!" The blue eyes of Lady Edward darkened. "Pally! Of all the abominable treachery!" She rose, her chin quivering, preliminary to tears. "*Everybody* is against me!" cried Orabella, as she swept tempestuously from the room.

II

Miss Flora Wardell sat with flushed face over her dish of tea; quarrelling always upset her digestion, and now she was in the middle of one of those aimless and apparently eternal quarrels with her mother, which seemed to Flora so unnecessary, yet from which Clara appeared to derive the little vitality which nowadays was hers.

"When I think of all the self-denial I've practised and the trouble I've taken over you and Mary Ann, and it seems neither of you will make the least effort to please me! God knows, I have few enough pleasures!" Clara was wailing. "When fortune flies out at the window, friends fly out at the door. To think of that Orry Burmester, cutting me dead in her carriage on Broad Street the other day——!"

"Oh, Mama, I don't suppose for a minute she saw you; Polly says her ladyship's sight is something shocking, and she's too vain to wear her glasses"

"I dare say! And let me remind you, there's no call for you to speak of her as 'her ladyship,' as though we were all inferior to that stuck-up madam of Paragon! Orry was good enough for her when we played together as girls, and her father was no better than mine, who'd think shame to set himself up as anything but an honest merchant."

"Have you heard that uncle Richard may be offered a knighthood?" Flora

cunningly changed the subject. "It will be nice for you, won't it, Mama, to be able to speak of 'my brother, Sir Richard'?"

But for once Clara failed to rise to the bait.

"And I think the least you could do, since I have so little to entertain me, is to take me and present me to Miss de Lorcha. I'm sure she'd be glad to meet a friend of her grandfather's, and she can practise her English on me; that will amuse us both."

"I'm afraid she's not yet sufficiently advanced for that, Mama, and so far there are very few visitors at Triton. Indeed, it's no use people coming unless they can talk French, because I can't be there all the time, and the ladies still require an interpreter."

"Few visitors indeed! You can't hoodwink me, Flora Wardell! The whole town's talking about the two young Saxes, that are there every day, and what about this Captain Brough Hanson, that they say's the favoured suitor for her hand?" chattered Clara, her mother over again in her expression of excited curiosity.

"Really, Mama, you should be careful what you believe, and I hope you don't repeat all you have been hearing," cried Flora, aghast.

"Don't you presume to order me, madam! As for believing—it would be a pity for Miss de Lorcha if I was to believe all that folks are saying," concluded Clara on a note of outraged virtue.

"People are really wicked," murmured Flora. "Just because the poor girl is foreign, and can't explain herself, they come to all sorts of conclusions which are nothing but a reflection on their own ignorance."

"And there's no need for you to call your mother ignorant. When a young unmarried female settles in a house and receives none but masculine company, most people know what to think. I don't say I subscribe to the general opinion, but I think it is high time somebody pointed out to her the indiscretion of habits that may be considered quite correct among foreigners, but create a bad impression in decent English society."

"This is outrageous, Mama!" Flora was nearly crying with anger. "To begin with, Miss de Lorcha isn't alone; she is very strictly chaperoned by her companion, the French lady, Madame Deschamps."

"And we all know what French morals amount to!"

"Do you think Miss Burmester would countenance anything improper? She visits the house almost every day."

"And how many more ladies visit it? I'll warrant her ladyship of Paragon isn't among them."

"I've told you, Mama, it's no use any one coming, unless they are prepared to talk French. It's hardly Miss de Lorcha's fault that we are badly educated, here in Bristol. Now and again Mr. Beaufort brings a friend, and I'm sure it's laughable to hear them stumbling over their tenses and adjectives! Not Mr. Beaufort, of course: he speaks French and Spanish like a native, and I can hardly imagine how we should get on without him. And Mr. Lionel begins to talk French quite nicely, although he is shy about it, and doesn't say much when I am in the room."

"And Captain Hanson?" pursued Clara. As Flora made no reply, she went on, unable to contain her gossip, although she knew it fell on unsympathetic ears. "Every one's saying he's after her money, of course. I must say I'll

be sorry for her if he succeeds in getting it; there's a hundred tales running about him—a dozen girls at least he's put in the family way, and gambling debts, and poor Clarke the tailor at his wits' end for the money the Captain's owing him; and I hear he's promised to pay the lot of them within twelve months."

"I don't know anything about those things, Mama," said Flora coldly; she rose and began to clear the table, but when she left the room her mother followed her.

"I dare say you don't, but your sister does. She says the Captain and Mr William Sax used to be as thick as thieves, and he's still a regular visitor to Paragon, where that silly creature Orabella makes a fuss of him on account of his smart relations."

"I dare say. Had I better not throw away the rest of this cake, Mama? It's getting very stale."

Clara absently snatched the cake from her daughter's hands and thrust it in the earthen pot.

"I wonder if it's true, about his mother being one of the Royal Family? I can remember old General Hanson: a handsome, snobbish old fellow who used to give us pennies to buy sweets when our nurses took us walking in the Green. But I never saw the mother—I've heard she was a lot younger than he was: quite a girl, in fact, and an earl's daughter, or something of the sort. She died soon after the Captain was born."

"You've got a remarkable memory, Mama," was Flora's dry comment.

"I have," said Clara proudly. "I can tell you, there's not much slips my mind; and one thing I can assure you—the Captain's not in the least like his father, I mean, the person who was *supposed* to be his father. Oh, no; the General was a most distinguished-looking person, while the Captain—well, I'd call him almost common, wouldn't you?"

"I've never noticed Captain Hanson's looks," said Flora coldly. "All I know is that he has very bad manners, and I have been surprised that he seems to be a friend of Mr. Beaufort Sax, who I'm sure is all that's gentlemanly, though so cold and distant I sometimes feel quite embarrassed." She looked round the kitchen. "If there is nothing else for me to do, Mama, I think I will take a walk down towards the water for a breath of fresh air."

"I don't know why you want to go down to those vulgar places—why don't you walk on the Green?" pouted Clara.

"I'm hardly smart enough for the Green at this hour of the day," said Flora, smiling faintly. "Besides, as it happens, I have to take a message to the Merchants' almshouses for Miss Burmester."

"I don't see why she should keep you running all night as well as all day. I suppose neither of you think I might want a little company."

"Why don't you sit in the parlour with Papa, Mama?"

"And watch him smoking his pipe and reading his paper, and sighing from time to time—do you want me to die of melancholia?" cried Clara.

"Then walk with me down to King Street; I am sure a little exercise would do you good?"

"Visiting paupers!"

"You can hardly call old Bowling a pauper, Mama!" smiled Flora.

"Old Bowling? Don't tell me you've not heard——?" Clara was once more agog with scandal.

"Heard what? There's nothing the matter with old Bowling is there? Miss Burmester wants me to find out if he will come and work as our night watchman."

"Then she'll have to look somewhere else," said Clara with satisfaction. "The old man fell in a fit in Wine Street this very afternoon, and they've taken him to St. Peter's Hospital."

"Oh dear," said Flora, not only disturbed on Pallas's account, but regretful on her own, for, like the rest of Bristol, she looked upon old Bowling as a local monument; it would hardly have been more upsetting if the famous equestrian statue of King William the Third had vanished from the middle of Queen Square. "How sorry Miss Burmester will be! Poor old man; I had better call in at the lodge and ask after him."

"If you wait a minute, I'll pop on my hat and accompany you. It's a long time since I was down by St. Peter's, and I doubt if I can manage to walk so far—but they say they've shifted the lunatics upstairs, and you might be able to catch a glimpse!" Clara panted in her excitement. "They say his beard's grown a foot and his nails are as long as the heathen Chinese's—and Clapton on Marsh Street's made an offer to buy him and run him as a raree-show!"

An expression of pity flitted over Flora's face as she helped her mother to dress. Almost as long as she could remember they had been badly off, and obliged to associate with people of a lower social status than themselves: yet she had not, it seemed, realized the extent to which her mother had absorbed their lower standards, while clinging to the outward forms of a society which, poor thing, she rarely had opportunity to grace. She felt fond and pitiful as she smoothed Clara's once pretty hair, and straightened the crumpled folds of a shabby pelisse.

Once in the street, in the soft, evening sunshine, Mrs. Wardell assumed the airs and graces of the prosperous and sought-after Miss Peddy, as though by an act of magic; gave patronizing acknowledgments to neighbours' greetings, and minced along as though shod with the finest chickenskin, instead of the clumsy leather that was hidden by the flounces of her gown.

A heavy coach rolled by, with an elderly negro clinging to the strap behind; the cloth which covered the coachman's seat was moth-eaten at the corners and its fringe of bullion tarnished; Clara's lip curled.

"You'd think with her money she might make a better show! Gracious me, Totty Shergill would sooner go in rags than spend a penny on a reel of cotton! I'd like to know who she's going to leave it to."

"Not us, at any rate, Mama!" Flora essayed a little joke.

"You never know—those eccentric old maids—how their minds jump. If Polly had had the sense to stay with her, instead of running off to lick the boots of Orry Burmester——"

"It's Lady Aurora she's working for; and really, poor Polly couldn't have stood it any longer—Miss Totty treated her worse than a slave."

"Fancy her keeping all her interests in her father's ships!" Clara paused on the edge of the kerb to look enviously after the coach. "I warrant she draws

a pretty income from her Liverpool shares! Not to mention your uncle's company. A lot she cares for Abolition——!"

"Mama, you don't think that uncle Richard is still in the slave trade?" cried Flora.

"Hold your tongue, miss! It's not your place, or mine, to 'think.' And I'm sure," mumbled Clara, "none of us had cause to be ashamed of the slave trade in your grandfather's day. If I'd had the sense to marry . . . Well, times change, and one has to be in the fashion." Her sharp elbow drove into her daughter's side. "Look who we have here!" she whispered excitedly.

They were half-way down the steep slope of Park Street, and down the new Great George Street, from the heights of Bullocks Park, rode two gentlemen on horseback, at the sight of one of whom Flora coloured faintly and dropped a curtsy, which was distantly acknowledged, while the other lifted a quizzing glass, appeared to find its object unworthy of his scrutiny, dropped it, and continued his conversation with his companion. Beaufort Sax and Captain Brough Hanson rode on; Clara's face was raspberry red with mortification.

"Just think of it—that I shouldn't even have bowing acquaintance with Orry Burmester's son!"

"I don't think you need feel you miss much, Mama," said Flora with, for her, unusual tartness. "Mr. Lionel is nice enough, but I don't care for Mr. Beaufort; he is too cold and aristocratic for the likes of me!"

"There are times you make me sick with your humility!" declared her mother. "If you hadn't been such a silly, withdrawing kind of creature, you might have been married before your father lost all his money, and we'd have been driving in our carriage instead of walking like a couple of shop girls, for Saxs to look down their noses at! On their way from Triton, I suppose," she added, impatiently snatching at the arm which Flora offered her. "I suppose she's handsome, this Miss de Lorcha?"

"Very: though in an odd, unfeminine way. It's quite amusing to see the way she strides about, dressed up in the male costume in which Mr. Lionel wanted to paint her portrait."

"Great heavens above! Do you mean she shows her form to gentlemen?" gasped Clara.

"No, no; she only puts it on when we are alone, but one day Mr. Lionel came in unexpectedly and found her wearing it. Madame Deschamps was very much annoyed."

"And so I should hope. And tell me," whispered Clara, forgetting her annoyance with her daughter in another onslaught of curiosity, "*is she very black?*"

"Naturally, with her Spanish blood, she is very dark——"

"Spanish blood! Don't be half-witted—she's half a negress!"

"Only a quarter: and she certainly isn't like any negress I have ever seen."

Clara glanced about her as if she missed something.

"There's hardly a nigger to be seen in Bristol nowadays; only Totty Shergill's footman and Pally's Joseph. When I was a girl you weren't fashionable at all unless you had a black boy to walk behind you; and very handsome some of the creatures were, after their style. I remember a man called Africa, who belonged to old Mr. Hercules Flood, and brought the news of his death to the Society's meeting—it was quite a drama. But they've all disappeared,

though you see a half-breed here and there—good gracious me! If that girl gets married there may be black children!”

“Oh, no, surely not! She’s only a quadroon——!”

Clara nodded her head sagely.

“I’ve heard your grandfather talk about families in which the black blood broke out after half a dozen generations,” she asserted. “That’s why folks are so down on intermarriages between the white and coloured races. It would serve Orry Burmester right,” she added viciously, “if she gets presented one day with a black grandchild!”

III

“It’s all very well, Beau, but I don’t feel as if I’m makin’ much progress!” Captain Brough Hanson rubbed a pimply nose and glanced sidelong, ruefully, at his companion. Like most people, he disliked Beaufort Sax; like all people, he had an enormous respect for him. Of all the obstinate, cunning devils! But it paid to humour him. Thanks to Beaufort, light was breaking upon a horizon whose blackness had for a long time disturbed the gallant captain; he had, in fact, seen nothing but ruin ahead until Beau came to him with his infamous proposal.

“There is no cause for haste,” said Beaufort coolly. “It seems you have created quite a good impression.” His ironic glance swept his companion and returned to his horse’s ears. Curious how people one has despised have a way of coming in useful, if one waits long enough. He had always looked down on William’s military friends, had accorded them, on their visits to Paragon, the bare minimum of civility—unless they had connections which made them worth cultivating. Beaufort never overlooked connections. He knew all the scandal about Brough Hanson’s birth: it complicated the Hanson genealogy, but it also gave him a footing in circles which are not usually open to a penniless captain in a crack regiment. And, having squandered his small patrimony within a year of his father’s death—which had occurred some decade before the events we are chronicling—Brough had become more or less of an adventurer: in fact, precisely the tool Beaufort was seeking for the furtherance of his present schemes.

No one had been more astonished than the captain when he was sought out by that stand-offish gentleman, William’s brother, reminded of previous visits to Paragon, and requested to resume old customs of regarding his friend’s home as his own. Brough was not naïve enough to suppose that Beaufort was after him for nothing, but, his invariable principle being never to refuse hospitality, and his regimental duties detaining him in the neighbourhood, it suited him admirably to place himself at Beaufort’s disposal. Beaufort, he found, on closer acquaintance, was unexpectedly agreeable, and equally unexpectedly sympathetic to the recital of woes which, on encountering a willing listener, the captain rarely kept to himself.

“I’m surprised you haven’t found a rich wife, Hanson, to assist you out of your difficulties.”

“Not to put too fine a point on it,” admitted the captain gloomily, “I’m keeping that as a *dernière ressource*. The truth is, I an’t made for matrimony,

and I know it; the idea of a female hung permanently about my neck gives me the shivers—and I don't mind owning it! I an't a family man, and if results have followed some of my little adventures"—he bestowed a preposterous wink upon the unmoved Beaufort—"I prefer to be in a position to ignore 'em. The truth is, my dear fellow, I dislike responsibilities, and would choose almost any other means than those of matrimony to extricate myself from my tangles. Of course," he shrugged, "it may come to that in the end; but, by heaven, I'd sooner find myself in Bedlam than at the legal beck and call of a woman who, because I've endowed her with my name, thinks she's entitled to my solicitude at every hour of the day! I an't a brute, Beau, and nothing sickens me equal to the sight of a woman in tears: but I an't fool enough to suppose that matrimony will alter my nature, or that I'll be willing to eat from the same platter for the rest of my life."

It was after this speech that Beaufort decided he had run his quarry to earth.

"It's the plaguy French," Hanson was continuing. "We lived in Dieppe for a while when I was a child, and I jabbered the lingo like a froggy, but one gets out of the habit, and the *señorita's* pronunciation an't so easy to follow. By God, she made me sweat to-day when we got on the subject of bullfighting! I didn't get all of it straight, I'm afraid; she wasn't saying she went in for fighting bulls herself, was she?"

"The art of bullfighting is practised, I believe, by some of the females of the Cuban nobility," said Beaufort, ignoring his companion's ludicrous look of alarm. "But," he added, with his thin smile, "did you get on no tenderer subjects than killing bulls?"

"We mentioned cockfighting," admitted the captain, "and I understood her to say she'd like to see a main. To tell you the truth, when I tried to get tender she became so plaguily evasive and chattered and laughed so much I couldn't make out what she was saying. 'Tis the very devil, trying to make advances to a woman in a foreign language! If she belonged to another class, of course, there'd be no difficulty; I'd clip her round that smart waist of hers and kiss her on that big, sulky mouth till she'd have no doubts what I was after——"

"I must advise you against adopting any such measures with the *señorita de Lorcha!*" Beaufort's tone was icy, although no one would have guessed the amount of control he found himself obliged to exert when Hanson spoke in this fashion of *María Pía*. "After all," he said presently, when his fingers, which had clenched themselves like steel, relaxed on the bridle, "it is only necessary for you to ingratiate yourself, to make yourself pleasant; the rest you can leave to me."

"You honestly think she'll stand for it, Beau?"

"I have seen no reason, so far, to doubt the powers of my persuasion on the *señorita de Lorcha*," answered Beaufort.

●

CHAPTER IX

I

"You ride like Diana!" Lionel was saying.

"Et vous—comme un centaure!"

The wind had blown her hair across the glittering line of her teeth, and her eyes flashed like black diamonds through the long fringe of her lashes. There was a spring, a joyous aliveness in every line of her body—the broad shoulders, narrow hips, and slender, tapering waist. She was Santiago's daughter, a daughter of de Lorchas, in her manner of governing a horse. Lionel, accustomed to the ladylike timidity of Sax cousins, was enchanted by her daring.

"Some day I'll paint you like that!"

"Ah, you think of nothing but painting! I believe"—her dark glance challenged him—"if you were to make love, you would do it better with a brush than in words!"

"Is— isn't that how it should be, for a painter?" he stammered.

Dios mios, she was thinking, what charm he had! Beside him other people had an air of being only half alive, Beaufort a corpse. She had a tingling in her fingertips, of longing to touch the clear, rosy skin, to lift and rumple the tawny flakes of hair that were ruffled on the blue-veined temples. No one she had ever met had wakened in her such a multitude of new and delicate sensations, so exquisitely delightful that she asked no more than fully to surrender herself to them. Yet, under all that brusquerie which had gathered like a crust over the surface of her nature—a crust which hardened every day among surroundings she grew to feel more and more inimical—there remained sufficient of the purely feminine to be aware that the demand for surrender must come from him. Would she ever have patience to wait until he made it?

It was long since she had begun to get anxious about herself, to wonder what in herself held at bay this curious mystery of love which most girls of the same age or younger had experienced in the fullest sense while she, María Pía de Lorchas, was still wondering about it. For, although Beaufort Sax, with his strange, snake-like wooing, had in a way excited her, she had never deluded herself that this was love. It had been left for Lionel, in that first electric moment of meeting down on the quays, to touch the nerve which had lain dormant, it seemed, to that very hour. It was that meeting which had steeled her determination to remain in Bristol, at whatever cost; she had found, she knew, the supreme compensation for the wound of her rupture with Santiago and her departure from Buonaventura. Life had robbed her of much—almost, she would have said a little while ago, of everything—but of this she was not to be robbed. But she must be very cautious, very subtle. There was at least no Isabela de Coria to plot against her; there was no danger—except, indeed, the danger of Beaufort's resentment, if he came to suspect the turn her sentiments had taken. But she had gone out of her way to be charming to Beaufort and his friends, since her first meeting with Lionel.

They had reined their horses on the crest of a hill, and the lovely panorama which Matthew had loved spread itself at their feet: green scoop of valleys, small grey manors, silvery shield of waters—then more valleys and more hills again. There was something tender, breathing, utterly alive about that landscape, which was dear to Lionel as it was dear to all its familiars. Her last words had brought a flush to his cheek, which still lingered, while his spirit strayed in ecstasy over the matchless scene; like Orabella, she felt his momentary remoteness, and there was a touch of jealousy in the tone in which she asked:

"What is it? Of what are you thinking?"

"I was thinking," he answered slowly, "that the curve of that hillside yonder reminds me of a lovely green nymph, stretched out in slumber under the sky; a nymph with whom I have always been a little in love—until to-day."

"Until to-day!" Her heart pounded at her bosom; their eyes met, and his, as well as hers, were burning, but her lips were crimson, while his whitened. He changed the subject quickly.

"How," he asked, "does all this look to you, after Cuba?"

The black brows contracted, she shot him a sidelong, almost resentful glance.

"I miss the sun."

"The sun? What do you call this?" He laughed as he tossed his arm up towards the wide blue span of the sky.

"You don't know what sun is in England." She closed her eyes for a moment, as though to shut away, to shut into herself, the golden secret of the sun she knew. "I do not wish," she pouted, "to talk about Cuba. . . ."

He leaned forward to lay his hand on her horse's bridle; the movement brought his face very close to hers.

"Nor to go back—there—again?"

"I don't know what you mean." She moved abruptly, as though his earnestness oppressed her. "Yes, of course I shall go back some day. Why do you ask? Do you wish to get rid of me?" Without waiting for his reply, she went on rapidly: "I stay here because it is my house; it is mine, as much as Buonaventura belongs to my father."

"Is that your only reason?" he pursued.

"You ask too many questions," she flashed at him, but her mood of ill humour was passed. She laughed, tightened the rein so that he was obliged to remove his hand, and touched the horse lightly with her spurred heel. "Perhaps, when I go, I shall give the house to your aunt; she is the only person who, since I came to Bristol, has been really nice to me."

"That is not a kind thing to say!"

"Well, perhaps I am not feeling so very kind! I am told there are two old señoritas Flood who live in the town, and I think it is not courteous of them not to call on me."

"They are terribly old," said Lionel, who knew all about Amelia and Michal from his aunt, "and the younger one is quite crazy; they tried to get her shut up a little while ago, but my Aunt Pallas prevented it."

"There is another thing which surprises me."

"What is it?"

"That I have not yet been invited to Paragon."

Lionel blushed deeply. He had been expecting this.

"It's—it's a little difficult," he stammered. "Mama does not speak either French or Spanish, and I think she feels embarrassed about meeting you."

"I do not see that is necessary, since both you and your brother can interpret for her. We met plenty of foreigners in Madrid, and there was no embarrassment on either side. After all, if people have a certain breeding, they act and speak in a fashion which is quite easy to understand—no?"

"You see, our customs are rather different over here——"

The smile she gave him was not, this time, one of amusement.

"*Ya lo creo!* For instance, I find it very odd that I am now here, riding with you."

"Why not?" But his heart quickened as he again bent over to look into her face.

"Why not indeed! *Tu eres muy inglés, chico!*" It amused her to speak to him in this familiar fashion in Spanish, which he did not understand; it gave her a thrill of intimacy, which his careful formality held at bay. "If it had not been for your aunt, Madame Deschamps would never have allowed it. She is very strict, very correct, in the way she looks after me. Besides, in Cuba it would be quite impossible."

"But why?" he persisted, and she gave him a look of scornful incredulity for his innocence.

"Because any Cubano, if he finds himself alone with a woman, regards it as a reflection on his honour, *mon cher*, if he fails to make love to her!" was the surprisingly blunt rejoinder.

"What an oaf I am!" Lionel was thinking as they rode on in silence. All his ignorance and inexperience did not prevent his recognizing, though in a darkened, half-bemused fashion, the nature of the adventure which reached towards him; he could feel it touching him with delicate, doubtful tendrils, it sent a vibration through his scrupulously platonic relationship with his brother's mistress. *Was* she Beaufort's mistress? Oh God, if he only knew!

The devil is never nearer than when one thinks of him; Beaufort gave substance to the old saying by riding out on his tall rakish bay to meet them. It would have taken a very naïve, or very self-satisfied, person to delude himself that he was pleased to see the couple together.

"Well, how did you find us?" said Lionel, feigning ease as his brother rode up, hat in hand, his cold, inexpressive eyes all for María Pía, who seemed to take the encounter for granted. She extended her gloved hand, which Beaufort raised to his lips.

"They told me at the house where I should find you." He turned to Lionel and spoke in English. "So this is how you study your painting."

"It's exactly what I am doing, Beau." He was surprised by the steadiness and good humour of his voice.

"In somewhat unorthodox fashion, eh?" The bantering tone deceived neither. "As I wish to have some conversation with the señorita de Lorcha, perhaps you'll be good enough, my dear fellow, to relieve us of your presence."

"As I don't understand Spanish, I shan't be in your way, shall I?" He was not to be treated as a schoolboy by Beaufort.

The button came off the foil.

"You may not understand Spanish, but you understand me."

He muttered his farewell; María Pía made some slight, formal protest, concealing her fury at a situation she perfectly understood. Speaking Spanish, Beaufort invented a reason for Lionel's departure, which she was too cunning to question. She hid her anger and her impatience behind an expression of smiling acceptance, but her eyes followed the retreating figure—a fact of which Beaufort was aware, and which he allowed to amuse him. Let her play the coquette, if it pleased her; he did not yet stoop to jealousy of a younger brother.

"I have some news for you," he told her presently.

"I hope it's good news?"

"I hope you will consider it good. My brother William and his wife are coming to pay us a visit."

She kept her eyes averted from his.

"I don't understand; how does that concern me?"

"It concerns you, and no one else." He paused, to allow this to sink in, before continuing. "I hope you will allow them to call upon you."

"*Madre mia*," she was thinking, "how his conversation creaks! Is it possible I found him a diverting creature in Spain?"

She answered with mock demureness:

"I am naturally pleased to receive any member of your family." It was more than they could say! But if she had the whole Sax family here, surely they were bound to invite her to Paragon? Perhaps this was some sort of English etiquette—odd and ungracious as it seemed: like buying a horse—looking it over before giving it a place in one's stable.

"I think you'll like Caroline. She's a very amusing, fashionable woman, and it will advantage you to make a friend of her."

"Well, I shall not be sorry to have some company; I haven't found Bristol a gay place, up to the present!"

"I warned you!" His dry smile showed appreciation of her humour; he would have been less pleased had she shown content in her surroundings. "It is not gay, *amiga mia*, and, even if you spoke the language, I know of no Bristol society I would willingly inflict on you. I did the best I could, in discovering Brough Hanson; he at least speaks French—of a kind!—which is more than these local bumpkins can manage."

"I am glad you say 'of a kind'!" she laughed at him.

"But seriously—don't you find Hanson a pleasant fellow?"

She shrugged her shoulders, allowing him to see her surprise.

"I find nothing to object to in him."

"I assure you," he said, with a curious emphasis, "that he is very much *épris*."

As she was silent, in astonishment, he continued:

"He may not have very much to offer, in looks or personal parts, but he has sterling qualities. You will find he has both discretion and common sense."

"You certainly seem very enthusiastic! I'm sure the captain would be

gratified to know he has so warm an advocate! How very odd of you, Beaufort; I should have thought you and he would have little in common."

"One thing we certainly have in common," he told her, with a meaning look. "And, for the rest," he evaded her, "he is a friend of William's. You will find my brother a very affable person; his wife, if you make friends with her, will be of much use to you when we all return to town."

"When will that be? I've made no plans to leave Bristol." His quick ear caught the defensive note in her voice. "So long as I remain in England, this is my home. It has not given me much of a welcome: that I admit. But I'll force it! . . . It can't beat me." The last words were bitten off between her teeth; he saw the heavy brows dragged down over her lowering eyes.

"Let it remain your home," he placated her, "but there are other, and pleasanter, aspects of English life, to which you must allow me to introduce you. You know I can't stay much longer in this part of the country; my work lies in London, and I must return to it."

"Of course you must," she agreed.

"Surely the rest is obvious? I cannot leave you here alone, with your ignorance of the English tongue and English ways."

"*Caramba*, do you find yourself responsible for me?" was the ironic retort, which brought a glint into his eyes.

"Don't try me too far!" he warned her. "You know the nature of my sentiments towards you; you know"—he paused, and moistened his lips—"you know that I burn for you night and day."

Could anything so frozen burn?

"Let me tell you something." She had pulled off her riding hat, and the wind blew her hair into a little crest of curls above her square young brow; she straightened her shoulders, as she said slowly: "I do not understand you at all."

"For the present, it is impossible for me to explain myself. I ask you only to trust me, until you have talked with Caroline."

Do Englishmen get their sister-in-law to propose marriage for them? She would have liked to tell him to go to the devil, to burst out laughing in his face. She bit her lips to keep them from smiling.

"I shall look forward to our meeting."

"Remember that she is a very clever, accomplished and experienced woman of the world: you can rely on her judgments implicitly."

"For instance, on her judgment of her brother-in-law?"

For some reason, this joke did not amuse Beaufort; he looked his disapproval.

"If she invites you to be her guest in London, may I assure her of your acceptance?"

"I should have to discuss that with Madame Deschamps."

"Pray," said Beaufort stiffly, "do nothing of the kind. It is a matter in which you must exercise your own judgment; on which no person, save, perhaps, myself, is equipped to advise you. Caroline's house in town is elegant and much frequented by society, but she has not much accommodation. You would have to take a maid. Caroline herself would chaperone you, and there would be no need for Madame Deschamps to accompany you. For her to do so might, indeed, create an unfortunate impression;

there is considerable disaffection in certain quarters against the French—except, of course, those whose titles and known positions place them above suspicion. The presence of an unknown, unsponsored Frenchwoman in her household would certainly embarrass Caroline, and perhaps cause awkwardness among her other guests——”

“*Entiendo.*” The tone was non-committal.

“Tell me you trust me; that, surely, I have earned.”

Her unfathomable glance came to rest on him, and, for some reason, her very muteness gave him satisfaction. Here was a woman whose pride matched his own; who would not waste herself on verbal protestations, but, when the time came, would let the action speak for itself.

“I must mention one other thing,” he continued, as though she had answered him. “I want you to do me a favour. When Caroline comes to call on you, receive her alone; what she has to say concerns no one but our three selves. Remember”—he leaned forward, and the dry, almost scaly touch of his palm on the uncovered part of her wrist from which the gauntlet had fallen forward sent a shiver through her; yet once she had thrilled to it! What morbid impulse, she wondered, had ever caused her to allow him those small freedoms on which he had built the whole edifice of his preposterous ambitions?—“the whole of our future happiness may depend on this.”

“And what has your happiness to do with mine, or mine with yours?” The unspoken question trembled on her lips. A month ago she would have taken it for granted; admiration, gratitude—many marriages were founded on less—would have furnished an all-sufficient reason for complaisance.

Watching her closely, Beaufort wondered whether he was losing ground by his scrupulous attention to the decencies. He was in an awkward position; according to his doctrine of behaviour, it was impossible for him to press his suit with the ardour he desired upon a lady who was under monetary obligation to him. Whatever were his vices, he had the standards of a gentleman, and it was not the first time they had stood in his way. It is to his credit that he never dreamed of relinquishing them. His conduct to María Pía was therefore even more punctilious, more underlined with ceremonies, than it had been in Madrid, for, however dishonourable might be his ultimate intentions, he could not, obviously, treat her as though she were a woman of no importance. Had she been so, he would not have fallen in love with her, he would coldly have made use of her, as he had done of many others in the past. But she had completely infatuated him, and there were no lengths to which he was not prepared to go to gain her.

“Some part of what my sister-in-law has to say,” he was telling her, “may not, at first hearing, be acceptable to you; I beg you to ponder it well, to make no hasty decision: above all, to remember that I care only for your well-being, and that I am prepared to make any sacrifice—however abhorrent—to secure it.”

This was indeed a singular wooing; had she seriously contemplated marrying Beaufort, she must have been alarmed by it. As it was, her curiosity became lively; she was impressed, despite herself, by his gravity. Sacrifice? Abhorrent? What words were these to use in asking a woman to marry one? Yet they stirred but the surface of her consciousness; the deeper, the essential part was away with Lionel, half-way down the hill. Lionel! Oh,

yes, that was love. By some means or other an understanding must be forced between herself and Lionel: when that was achieved, she could abandon herself to this game of cat and mouse with Beaufort, bringing to it all the cynicism and skill of which she knew herself capable. For some deep warning, born of feminine intuition, told her that, for the sake of their mutual safety, Beaufort must be allowed to suspect nothing until she could place herself, and Lionel, beyond the scope of his inevitable revenge.

II

Beaufort, Lionel was thinking: what the devil was he doing? He was playing some infernal game of his own, and, as usual, not caring whom he wounded in so doing. Lionel knew that his visits to Triton were few and far between; if it was a courtship it was the strangest one that had ever been; and if it was an *amour*, its management must tax the participants' ingenuity, considering the close watch kept over the girl!

Perhaps Beaufort had come to the conclusion that discretion was the better part of valour; if that were so, of what poltroonery was he not guilty! Little love as he had left for his brother, Lionel could not feel that he would sink so low. Let this girl be a quadroon, or what you will: she was a princess, and Beaufort's behaviour was an insult to her. What part did Hanson play in the ugly affair? Surely no man would introduce a creature like Hanson to a woman he respected? Yet there he was, day in, day out, sometimes in Beaufort's company, sometimes presenting himself alone, with a grinning certainty of his welcome: talking his execrable French—which made María Pía laugh, and caused Madame Deschamps to pinch her fine nostrils—showing the ladies ridiculous tricks with cards, playing *écarté*—apparently a licensed entertainer, with the seal of Beaufort's approval on him. "*Qu'est ce qu'il fait—toujours ici?*" Lionel had been driven to inquire in a bitter aside of María Pía, who shrugged and grimaced her reply: "*On dit que c'est le garde-chien, de la part de ton frère!*"

It was clear the affair had gone pretty far before their arrival in England: why else would Beaufort have invited her to Paragon—an invitation now, for obvious reasons, revoked. Apparently he was intent on saving his precious diplomatic skin!—since it was not for a moment to be assumed that he considered his family's feelings in the matter.

"I have fallen in love with her," thought Lionel hopelessly. He knew it was hopeless, for it would break his mother's heart. Not once, since María Pía's arrival in Bristol, had her name been mentioned in his hearing at Paragon; Orabella preserved, for her, an almost fantastic silence upon a subject which, as Lionel guessed, tormented her night and day; but during the week-ends when he was at home, he saw her watching Beaufort like a lynx; if he was away for more than an hour or two, her eyes would plunge at his as though to tear his secret out by the roots. And Beaufort was as inscrutable as a block of ice. He would never explain or discuss his movements; he simply left his mother to agonize.

Lionel would fain have avoided those week-ends; he wanted only to work—and he knew he was spending too much time at Triton. He sedulously

attended his classes, and then, in the time he had planned to devote to free study, he found himself again and again on his way to Brandon Hill, excusing himself on the score of the sketches he was making for the portrait. He had no great hopes of it; he knew he had neither the skill nor the experience, as yet, to do his sitter justice; and each time he saw her she did something to alter his conception, his vision shifted, and all that had gone before seemed like so much wasted effort.

He had begun her in a mantilla—exotic and velvety, with a great vermilion fan spread open on her bosom. Then she told him about the masquerade of her first meeting with Pallas, and he insisted, much against Madame Deschamps's sense of the proprieties, that she should dress up in the clothes she had taken out of Matthew's chest. In the fine, out-of-date coat of wine-coloured brocade—the same Matthew had worn for the last day of the case at Gloucester—with its Mechlin ruffles and elegant satin small-clothes, she was so handsome that he felt he could never paint her in any other way. Although the house contained no painted record of Matthew Flood, Flood likenesses came from a dozen canvasses to reach their quintessence in the tall, hermaphroditic figure that wore masculine clothes with a flourish that would have done credit to any ruffling gallant of her grandfather's day. Only Madame Deschamps's positive prohibitions prevented his transference of this enchanting subject to canvas. It reminded him of a youth of his own age whom he had loved dearly at Oxford; it gave him an exquisite and sexless thrill which yet contained all the elements of sex in its most sublimated form.

He had striven to keep his artist's vision pure, free from the confusing motives of passion, but she stirred in him a continual excitement which was the more disturbing because he could feel it reciprocated by her. She could hardly have given him plainer indication than in the morning's conversation that she was prepared to accept his advances: which meant either that she was heart-whole or a heartless, promiscuous coquette—which latter, try as he would, not only for his own but for Orabella's sake, he could not fit into her character as he knew it. During the short weeks of their acquaintance she had driven him nearly mad with her fluctuations between her feminine, foreign subtlety and an odd, almost masculine directness which, he could see, shocked her dueña. María Pía saw it as well; in one of Madame Deschamps's brief absences from the room, she referred to it in accents of amusement.

"*Tu vois?*" It was part of her affectation, at such moments, to *tutoyer* him—a trick which partly gratified and partly offended Lionel, it was as though she chose to regard him as her little brother. "*Elle est scandalisée, la pauvre Deschamps! Que veux-tu?*" One does not come through my experiences without parting with some of the conventions. *Tu sais*, Lionel—it was not a joke, the scape from Madrid."

And sometimes she talked, as he felt in his heart she never talked to Beaufort; she offered him casually, as one might offer crumbs to birds, an intimacy which all Lionel's modesty could not prevent his realizing was for him alone. She showed him a patch of her Cuban life, like a scrap of cherished embroidery, hiding it quickly before he could fully examine it; there was something half ashamed, profoundly nostalgic in such sudden

gestures, which she covered with a swift, arrogant reserve. He suspected she was sick with longing for Cuba; why, then, did she not return there?

On her account he had collected every scrap of local information that was to be had about her grandfather's family; he had accompanied her and Madame Deschamps on an expedition to St. Mary Redcliff, where they had gazed upon the memorial tablets Lionel translated for their benefit; on the last, with its brief inscription, her eyes had rested with a painful intensity.

MATTHEW,
grandson of Hercules,
son of James Flood & hys wyf
of this City,
lost with the *Cassiopæia*
off the coast of High Barbary
in the year 1764.

"I will have something added to that," she told them. "There is room, is there not, at the bottom of the stone?"

"What do you wish to add, *ma chère*?" asked Madame Deschamps.

"Don't you see? It is not complete. Read me those again"—her hand pointed to the tablets of Hercules and Jason—the former a scrolled, six-foot slab bearing the record of five generations of Floods, with Hercules at the foot: the latter a meagre, twelve-inch panel which had been contributed, not by Jason's family, who had abjured the popish practices of the Redcliff, but by some anonymous subscriber to the Flood tradition who deplored the exclusion of any Flood, however renegade, from the family tabernacle.

"*'Aussi son épouse tendre et fidèle,'*" translated Lionel laboriously.

"They all have their wives, excepting Grandfather; it must be added, 'Sheba his wife,' and also 'his daughter, María Cayetufia.' That will leave plenty of room for me, won't it, when the time comes?"

The eyes of Madame Deschamps met Lionel's; was there not a stirring of Floods in earth . . . ?

III

In his mausoleum in St. James's, old Lord Mildenhall rendered up the ghost. The news reached Paragon by courier: it caused little sensation, except among the staff. Lionel, appraised by messenger, learned that he had a title, and was ironic about it: William, in the mess, swore mightily when he received his first despatch to "Captain the Lord William Sax." It added, he reckoned, at least fifty per cent. on to his bills and was productive of no advantage. In her bedroom, Orry Burmester stared at her own reflection, and tried to realize that she was a marchioness. It was hard to imagine: Edward had changed no whit since he became Mildenhall—a title by which she tried for a while to address him. But old forms persisted; she had loved him as Edward, and Edward he would remain, she knew, as long as they both drew breath. She cried a little, remembering Peregrine: remembering that Beaufort was the next Lord Mildenhall. . . .

CHAPTER X

I

"So you got yourself in the loony-house at last? How goes it, uncle?" After this falsely hearty beginning, Nathaniel put the back of his hand before his mouth to mutter: "The old cock ain't looking as spry as he was. Come on now," he rallied the silent figure. "There's all your pals at the Dolphin askin' arter you, and a peck o' chatter a-goin' on as needs your hon'rab'le 'tention!" Nathaniel winked, but the blue eyes could not wink back.

He knew, God help him, all about the "peck o' chatter"; it had spread even to the wards in the Old Mint. It went from bed to bed, and why, O Lord, why didn't the 'thorities hear about it? But the 'thorities were very dim and far away from patients in the Old Mint; the nearest they came to 'thority was when committee members, on their rare visits of inspection, stood in the doorway, with handkerchiefs to their noses; nodded rapidly, snuffled a few questions to the crone in charge, and went rapidly away. Few of them even knew the Governor by sight, and they knew the doctors only as sodden, seedy individuals whose attention it was wiser to evade than to rouse. St. Peter's did not provide much beyond a bed, of sorts, on which a sick person could lie, and heal himself, or maybe die. But just lately things had started to brisk up a bit; thanks to the new hospital up on Brandon Hill a man at least had a bed to himself, and there were sporadic efforts at cleaning, and a little more attention was paid to one by the old women who hobbled between the pallets.

China Ben, whose business was not in the sick wards at all, but who was off duty, had become a man of importance; it was he mainly who fed the flood of chatter that occupied the patients who were not too sick to be interested in anything.

"Got any more noos, China?" Nathaniel asked, as, lighting his pipe, he sat down on the foot of his uncle's bed.

"Nuthink to speak on. We bin quiet these two-three days, a-mutterin' to ourselves in 'eathen lingo. 'Twas last Choosedy we 'ad our last dose o' the willywaws."

"Ay," came a hoarse whisper from a 'neighbouring bed. "Ye might ha' 'eard 'un up i' the town. A-roarin' and a-bawlin' murther, an' not a wink o' sleep for nobody."

"Did he say ought, China?"

"'E'd got a-plenty to say, bucko, an' a rare mixture it was—religion an' blasphemy an' a mouthful about some black judy as seems to 'ave stuck in is mind! An' names of towns an' countries—all spoke masterful, like one that's uset to givin' orders sooner nor takin' 'em. An' then 'e seems to come over all sober, and ses, 'Bring me the person that's in charge.'"

"So then——?"

"I ses, 'I'm in charge, bucko,' and tells 'im not to forget it, an' sharp, afore I can get out o' the bastard's way, 'e lets drive at me with 'is fists, yellin' like a baboon, a-callin' of me 'eathen names as 'ud bring a blush to the cheek of a

'ardened mariner!—and 'twas the best part of an hour afore I brought 'im to bearin's."

"Did you report it?"

"Ay, to Charlie."

"You said naught to the Guv'nor?"

China Ben stared and spat.

"'Oo the 'ell d'ye think I am, bucko? I ain't a-losin' my billet, fallin' foul o' Charlie."

"Ay, 'e's keen on 'is monopolies, is Charlie," mumbled someone. "It don't do for us folks to pick 'is preserves."

Nathaniel looked at his uncle; the poor, twisted face was incapable of expressing the thoughts that went on behind J. R. Bowling's mottled brow, but a certain fixed agony in the eyes afflicted Nathaniel with an uneasiness foreign to that casual person's nature. Sergeant Bowling was not noted for intelligence, but he had a certain amount of serviceable common sense, and a true affection for his uncle. He had not been present when the elder man had had his stroke, and he had had to depend for his account of it on China Ben, a none too reliable messenger.

It seemed that the two old shipmates had encountered at the Red Lion in Wind Street, which, as we have seen, was China Ben's favourite, if unlucky, rendezvous: and here he invited his old friend to celebrate his new appointment as night watchman to the asylum. The new arrangements at the Old Mint were unpopular, he allowed, with many; but it was an ill wind that blew nobody good, and two shillings, China Ben reckoned, paid handsome for the loss of a few hours' sleep.

"And what are you charging, these days, for a sight o' your show piece?" one of the company had demanded.

China Ben wagged his head.

"Perquisites ain't what they was; 'tain't so easy for the customers to mount them stairs, like it was in the old quarters." He mumbled something about tale-bearing, and some of the hospital staff that "made trouble" out of jealousy, because no one was going to pay coppers for a sight of their charges. He did his best, however, to make up for the deprivation by describing the latest antics of the by now famous inmate of the lunatics' cells and, from his own account, had the company "in fits o' laughter," in which, as it was later remarked, J. R. Bowling had not joined. The old mariner, it was remembered, had sat silent, puffing his pipe; no one had made much of it, J. R. Bowling was "getting on," "wasn't the man he was."

"We was all a-laughin', and I was a-showin' 'em 'ow 'is majesty carries on—ay, 'e might be Lucifer an' Belzybub an' the King o' the Cannibal Islands made into one! An' another time it's a gospel preacher, a reg'lar soul-saver, a-howlin' about damnation an' the Cross o' Jesus—makes yer blood run cold, I tell ye! I seen Charlie clout 'im across the 'ead—not out o' malice, mind ye: but all that 'ell fire talk gets on yer nerves, an' strike me blind if I'd not 'a bin down on me marrowbones, prayin' the Almighty to save me, if it 'adn't bin for Charlie."

"Then it seems like 'e gets sick o' preachin', and starts swearin' a bit on 'is own account. 'To 'ell with ye!' says he. 'To 'ell with you, Biathar; I'm goin' up to Omo. . . .'"

It was at this point, according to eye-witnesses, that a queer sound had come from J. R. Bowling; they had seen him rise, and his face, said someone, was the colour of fire; it seemed like he'd lost his power of speech, though his jaws were working and his hands sawed the air. They had all stared at him as he staggered across the room, then, when he got out into the air he pitched forwards and fell with a crack on the cobbles. There was a crowd, and the tale went round it was the plague, and it started a panic; people started rushing in all directions. Then some fussy body had insisted he should be taken off to the hospital. . . .

It was so that Nathaniel had pieced together the history of his uncle's stroke. He knew he lived in the past, that he mourned the *Cassiopaia* as a man may mourn wife or child, and knew that he harboured (from Nathaniel's point of view) a totally unreasonable sense of guilt for the loss of its owner. He watched J. R. Bowling closely as he slowly said:

"The boys at the Dolphin is talkin' of gettin' up a deppytation."

"A what d'ye say?" asked China Ben behind him.

"A deppytation," repeated Nathaniel, speaking very slowly so that he might be sure the meaning of his words penetrated the brain that struggled behind that anguished brow. Did he imagine the look of desperate attention that came into his uncle's eyes? "They talk of askin' for an inquiry into the chap's affairs; 'cos if he's one of the survivors, it's common 'pinion he desaves better nor being put into the Old Mint."

"How d'you make that out, bucko?" China Ben sounded offended.

"Seems like there's a fund." Nathaniel, who had made it his business to know many things, nodded over his pipe. "Maybe you know about it, uncle?" The blue eyes strained, but gave no sign. "'Tain't public knowledge, 'cos 'twas all atween the owners themselves: Mr. John Peddy, an' Lawyer Shergill, and there's some ses Mr. Ralph Burmester, Miss Pally's da, was in it—as was started for the fam'lies of them as was lost in the *Cassypeer*, an' for the maint'nance of any survivor as reached home in a state unable to support 'isself."

"What's the good o' that? Ef this chap comes off the *Cassypeer*, an' ef there's money about, 'tis the 'orspital 'ull get it; 'twon't do no good to the pore sod hisself," grunted the voice from the neighbouring bed.

"There may be two 'pinions about that." Nathaniel rose and bent low over his uncle. "Cheer up, old cock; if this 'ere turns out to be one of your shipmates, 'is pals 'ull see to it 'e gets 'is dues. Buck up, old sharpshooter, and get on them pins o' yours; 'cos if there's fightin' to be done, we'll want the bro's testimony to 'elp us win our cause."

As Nathaniel stepped out into the yard, the plump, self-important figure of Mr. Richard Peddy issued from the Governor's entrance on the opposite side. The sergeant stiffened and saluted; Mr. Peddy acknowledged the salute with condescension.

"Ah, you, Nathaniel Bowling. You have been visiting the sick, I take it. And how is your uncle to-day?"

"He don't seem much diff'rent, sir. Looks as if the old chap's in a low way."

"Gettin' on for eighty, isn't he? Ah, well, the Lord has favoured him; three-score and ten is supposed to be mankind's allotted span. By the way"—Mr.

Peddy checked his stride towards the gate—"you, I take it, are the next of kin?"

"That's correct, sir."

"Then you will see to the removal of his personal effects from the Merchants' almshouses."

"Do—do you mean you're turning him out, sir?" stammered Nathaniel, aghast.

Peddy's eyebrows rose coldly.

"Of what use is the guardians' charity to your uncle, now he is in St. Peter's Hospital?"

"But—but he ain't going to stay there for ever!" spluttered Nathaniel, his indignation getting the better of his prudence. "The terms of occupation ses, for the rest of 'is nateral life, perviding 'e don't forfeit it by 'is conduct; I know it, sir, 'cos I seen the doccuments. There never was a more decent, honest-livin' old codger than my uncle John; likewise 'e's a public 'ero. They can't rob a 'ero of 'is 'earth an' 'ome, sir, just 'cos 'e's a sick man and unable to speak up for hisself!"

"You had better not lose your temper, sergeant. There is no reflection on your uncle's character; if he ever leaves St. Peter's—which is very unlikely—accommodation will be found for him—elsewhere; you can depend on that."

"In the poorhouse?" was Nathaniel's shrewd retort. "Nay, sir; that won't do at all. The Merchants' houses is one thing, the poorhouse another; the poorhouse ain't no place for a decent mariner, as never begged a copper in his life, and wore hisself out in the service of owners like your da."

"I warn you: remove his property, or it will be put out," snapped Peddy, and walked on. With a couple of strides, Nathaniel overtook him.

"There's another matter I'd like to mention to you, sir."

"Now, my man, this is impudence; I shall speak to your commanding officer."

"Speak as much as you like!" Nathaniel lost his temper. "There ain't no law, military nor civil, as forbids an honest man to ask for a hearing. There's folks in Bristol, sir, as wants an inquiry into the case of the chap they calls the Devil-Man o' Corsica."

Biting his lips in silence, Richard Peddy again cursed the name of Pallas Burmester. It was that meddlesome old woman who had raised the storm of curiosity which now seemed to be blowing about the Old Mint. He had heard the rumours, and had pooh-poohed them aside. If it were true—it was a thousand chances to one—that this lunatic were a survivor of the *Cassiopeia*, what was to be gained by establishing the fact? It meant only a good deal of inconvenience and trouble for the officials of St. Peter's—it was like the rabble's insolence to demand it! The man was stark, raving mad; he could contribute nothing to the little that was known of the vessel's loss. The underwriters had paid up, and the sum they had paid formed part of his patrimony; that was all that concerned Richard Peddy, who had none of that personal love of the ships that brought him his fortune which had been shared by his father and the elder Peddy's partners. The firm was already doing quite nicely out of slave-smuggling, and they wanted to raise no old ghosts of the slave trade at this ticklish moment. If some foolish, romantic interest still surrounded a ship which had vanished nearly forty years ago, let those who

were interested work it off in gossip. He was purple with anger as he answered Nathaniel Bowling.

"Take my advice, my man, and don't meddle in matters that don't concern you. The guardians of St. Peter's hospital know their own business better than you, or any person in Bristol."

"It so happens as this ain't their business alone, sir; Bristol folks is still mourning the men as was lost in the *Cassypeer*. There was some fine brave lads went down off the coast of High Barbary, and their wives an' sweet-hearts 'an't forgotten 'em."

"And what good is a madman to such people?" contemptuously demanded Peddy. "Perhaps you and they don't realise that someone, if his identity is established, becomes chargeable with his upkeep?" He laughed unpleasantly. "Tell 'em that; it may cool down their curiosity!"

"At that rate," said Nathaniel, sticking like a bulldog to his objective, "it surprises me you don't exercise yourself about it. The Corporation an't famous for spending its own money, when it sees a chance of getting its fist into somebody else's pocket!"

"I'll have you thrashed for your insolence!" Peddy raised his fist menacingly.

"Oh, no, you won't," said Nathaniel easily. "Any more than you'll try it on yourself. I'm no Corporation sarvint, I hold petty commission in the King's Army, as you an' your tribe o' skinflints an' bloodsuckers can't touch. You'll maybe be sorry for this day's work, Mister Richard Peddy, so I'll wish you good-day and to hell with you!"

Damn me for a hot-headed fool! he told himself, as he watched Peddy strutting away, with the ludicrous gait of a man so transported with rage that he can barely walk straight. Nathaniel smothered a snort of laughter as his enemy collided with the gate-post, but he knew there was little cause for laughter. Supposing Peddy took it out on J. R. Bowling? Supposing the old man was turned out of his hospital bed, to depend on casual charity for his maintenance? Nathaniel, on his sergeant's pay, half of which was earmarked to the young woman he intended some day to marry, and who relentlessly commandeered each week the money she bestowed under the hearthstone of her mother's cottage in an old blue stocking, could not keep his uncle. It was she—the young woman—who, when he confessed to her the morning's imprudence, found the solution.

"Yo gurt big zany, there an't but one thing to do!"

And, as he stared, uncomprehending—

"Go to Miss Pallas Burmester, o' course!"

II

There could hardly have been a greater contrast between brothers than between Beaufort and William Sax: the former tall, thin, refined to bloodlessness—the latter, square, plethoric, with the empurpled coloration of high blood pressure. William had been a very pretty boy, resembling his mother; he was now a coarse-looking man who modelled himself—perhaps unconsciously—on his Royal colonel. High play, heavy drinking and women had

left their mark on William, who, nevertheless, was a pleasant fellow enough, and more so in his cups. He had little affection, but a naïve respect for his brother Beaufort; Beau was a clever devil, and would be an important one, some day; all the same, he was a deuced dull dog, and the disclosures Beau had seen fit to make to him had roused William's liveliest interest.

His eyes goggled, he slapped his thigh; he would have slapped Beaufort's shoulder, but that correct gentleman did not encourage liberties, even from his brothers.

"Egad, Beau, I always said you were a dark horse! But who'd have believed it of you?" he crowed delightedly. "Egad, it's the prettiest scheme I've heard of for years!"

"You will support me in it?"

"Of course I will, my dear fellow—for Brough's sake, no less than your own. He's a damn' good fella, is Brough: I always told you so—but I'd never have expected to find the pair o' you like a couple of old cronies!"

Beaufort's eyelids lowered themselves scornfully; was William fool enough to think he would cultivate a person like Hanson, save for the achievement of his own ends?

"Well, here's to you both!" said William, raising his glass. "And if the nigger's as pretty as you say——"

"The señorita de Lorcha is not a negress, and I have not claimed prettiness for her."

"Well, she must have something, Beau," said William ingenuously, "or you would not have fallen for her. What a wily fellow you are! I vow you've made me impatient to see your black pearl. When do we visit her? It had better be soon, for you know how Caroline hates Paragon, and it only needs another row with Mama to make her take to her wings."

"Oblige me by not speaking as though we were about to call on a courtesan! I will arrange the matter as soon as possible; meanwhile, I depend on you to detain Caroline until our business is accomplished."

"I an't got any influence with Caroline!" grinned William. "Anyhow, what's it got to do with her?"

"A good deal." William's jaw dropped. "My dear fellow"—the flick of contempt in the endearment made no impression on the other's tough hide—"lacking in finesse as we know you to be, you can hardly imagine that this is a matter which I, or Hanson, can handle for ourselves?"

"I should have thought you could leave it to Brough——" goggled William.

Beaufort controlled a faint movement of impatience. He spoke rapidly, then more slowly, for the sake of William's dimmer intelligence; the latter listened, jaws agape, and, when at last he had grasped the purport of Beaufort's allusions, pushed his wig askew to scratch behind his ear.

"It don't sound so pretty, put that way!"

"It would, however, be easy for Caroline, with some show of sympathy and goodwill, to explain the position, so far as I myself am concerned: and to counsel the lady, in her own interests, to accept the situation."

"Well, but I don't know if Caroline 'ud choose to be mixed up in an affair like this."

Beaufort looked cynical.

"On grounds of morals, or manners?" He could have told William a thing

or two about Caroline, whom, on a bygone occasion, he had helped to beguile through a temporary grass widowhood.

"Morals be damned," grunted William, "it's a deuced awkward position!" It was like Beau, who never did anything for anybody, to expect his relations to put themselves out for him. "Hang it, Beau, you ask a-plenty, when it suits you, from your family. We an't had so many favours from you!"

"You may," said Beaufort, and his cold gaze cut short the other's blustering, "expect more, in the future—if all goes as it should."

III

"*Buenos días.*" She spoke in her deep, resonant voice, looking round her at the occupants of the ward, who gaped, as usual, at "the Spanish madam." They had not yet made up their minds about her, her exotic presence was a disturbance in their day, and, at the sound of the foreign language, a few stifled giggles in their cupped fists "*Qué mal educado, este gente!* They stare at me"—she dropped into the French which her companion understood—"as though I were some sort of strange animal—!"

"So you are, my dear; a beautiful, strange animal, which has strayed by chance into a cage of domestic beasts."

"But I am English! at least, part of me is. Don't they know that, these people?"

"Some of them know it, and that is what makes them so interested. If you were at home, can't you imagine how odd it would seem, if a Spanish girl came among you, unable to speak her own language?"

"I begin to speak my language," said María Pía painstakingly. "*Ayer*—yesterday, isn't it—the señorita Mees Wardell tells—no, tole—me, I make progress. I am not—what is the word—*perezosa*—*parasseuse*—no?"

"No, you aren't lazy," conceded Pallas, smiling. She laid her hand on the girl's arm, and drew her out into the yard, where the doves hopped about, searching for crumbs of bread from the scrapings of the hospital vessels. María Pía looked at them and her brow contracted a little.

"Mama kept doves; Papa gave her a little painted house for them, and she would have them all over her—on her wrists, her knees, her shoulders—when she sat on the porch. She was so gentle, no creature was ever afraid of her."

"Was she—my dear?"

"*Ya lo creo!* You would have loved her—she was so pretty, and so gay before she got ill. You know—Deschamps has told you—*mi padre* married again?" Her voice had hardened. "It is not unreasonable; I have not any brothers. Instead"—she threw out her hand towards the sun-warmed walls and trees—"I have got this. This is mine. Mama said it was to be; Papa would never go against her wishes."

"Yes, this is yours." Pallas spoke in a low tone.

"I want it to be as it was in my grandfather's time, and I want it to be important, and for people to feel that I am important, because of it! You must help me. It is very difficult; it is a terrible language to learn, and until I can speak English I cannot make any sort of impression on these people,

who choose to treat me as a foreigner. I cannot give orders, I cannot alter things, and make them as I want them. It is like being tied up! It is like having a part of oneself cut out!" Her hands, pressed close to her thighs in the folds of her skirt, clenched themselves. "You do not know how it was at Buonaventura, do you, señora? It was like a little province; we ruled it. Our people came to us for everything; all the ranches and little properties in our part of the island turned to Buonaventura when there was any trouble. . . . Do you see? *We* were there what *you* are here." She caught her lip in her teeth; Pallas saw the broad, delicate nostrils quiver—a trick, she remembered with a constriction of the heart, of her grandfather's.

"I understand, my dear. You must miss it all very much. You will be glad, perhaps, to go back?"

"Glad? It won't ever be like that again for me," she muttered. "Buonaventura is no longer my affair. But this—this is my own. It is mine, even if it resists me. It does resist me," she insisted. "I take a piece of earth in my hand, and it seems to melt away, out of my fingers. You know what I mean? I touch something in the house—in *my* house: something that is *mine*—and it shuts itself against me. This can't go on; I've got to break it open—I've got to make it understand it belongs to me, I've got to do something." She made a passionate gesture, in which Pallas sensed all the frustration, the deep, formless disappointment which ordinarily she concealed. "Do you really understand, señora? Though I keep telling myself 'It is mine,' I can't make myself feel it; it might be an inn, the house of a stranger, it holds me off—"

"María Pía, I don't think you must call me 'señora.'"

"*Pues—?*" She knitted her brows. "What shall I say, then?"

"You'd better call me Aunt Pallas, like the rest of my young people do."

"Aunt—that's *tía*, isn't it?" María Pía slipped her hand through the elder woman's arm, pressing it close to her side. "Yes, I like it. I like you—ah, it is much more than that. I feel I can trust you; that you are not like these others, waiting to see me make a blunder, to—to profit by it—"

"You are very like your grandfather." Pallas stood still; an aching memory stared out of the caverns of her eyes. "Don't—don't—"

"Don't what?"

"Don't let life hurt you too much. There are things, my dear, it's no use to struggle against; you are perhaps too young to realize that. It is hard to be patient, when one is young, and it is hard—very hard—to accept the past." She sighed, looking across the wall to the twisted chimneys of Triton, that raised themselves above the crests of the elms. "Triton belongs to the past; even I feel, sometimes, that it is like a cupboard to which one has lost the key. I wish I could find it for you, my dear; yet, if I found it, I wonder if you'd be the happier? Perhaps one is wiser to leave it with its secrets. I feel sometimes—forgive me, and try to understand—that you have no place here." As the girl's arm stiffened, Pallas drew her closer. "Now I have offended you. How can I explain? You are young, and full of life and the ardour of living; and Triton is dead—it has been dead for a whole generation; it died when your grandfather went away."

"But don't you see? That is why I am here," she cried. "I am here to make it live. Do you believe, like I do, that things are planned outside ourselves?"

Señora—I mean, *tía*—Aunt Pallas: don't you believe I was meant to come to Bristol?—that there's some reason for it all, somewhere? You've just said I'm like Grandfather; I want to know more about him; I want to know the things he did, and to go on with them; I want to make this place like it was when he had it——”

“He had it for such a very little time. . . . There was a lawsuit, you know——”

“There are always lawsuits in families; and I think Triton must be a very important place, since there has always been so much argument about it!”

“It was important, because it had belonged to Floods for so many generations. Now—there are no more Floods. You know—I have shown you where the timber-yard used to stand; that's gone, they have built houses over it. And the slave trade, which brought your great-great-grandfather his fortune, has come to an end,” said Pallas slowly. It was the slave trade, she reflected, that had brought its glories to Triton: that had floored it with marbles and sprayed its walls with the wood-carver's art: that had contributed its splendid architraves and loaded its boards with silver. Triton was dead, not because of the withdrawal of a master who had hardly established his ownership, but because of the death of the slave trade: like a felled tree with the sap running out of its bole.

“But, *Tía Pallas*,” María Pía was saying, “there are no more Floods? Mama was Flood, and I am Flood as well as de Lorcha. It can't stop like that—it has got to go on! I tell you, I *feel* it; I feel bound to it, as I once felt bound to Buonaventura.” She waited, and as her companion made no reply, she continued: “I already have some plans, though they are not very important, perhaps: still, they move the right way. I have decided, for instance, that I am going to have the two old señoritas Flood here: you know, the mad one and the one who is a kind of Beata. They have a right to the shelter of this roof, as much right as I have, though I am the owner; ownership always means duties, does it not?—and in my country—my father's country,” she corrected herself, “we would be ashamed to allow any of our relatives to live in poverty while a house existed in which they would be welcome. It is a disgrace to the family name. So, although these old ladies have not shown me very much politeness, I shall be obliged if you will convey to them my compliments and my wishes that they shall at once take up their dwelling in my house.”

Pallas wondered how such an offer, coming from such a source, would strike Miss Amelia, who had coldly declined to recognize her young kinswoman—not only a child of sin and shame, but a Papist. For the moment, however, she shelved the subject.

“My dear,” she said gravely, “tell me: do you seriously propose to settle in England?”

“Is there any reason why I should not?”

“I do not think it would be wise.”

“Why not? Am I not wanted in Bristol? Do you not want me?” she asked, proudly and pointedly.

Deliberately turning her thoughts from what it would cost her to lose this girl, whose every look and word reminded her so vividly of Matthew that she seemed at times to be moving in a dream, she forced her lips to smile.

“I will not answer foolish questions! But it is very hard, my dear, to be

happy, to make a home, in a foreign country: particularly a country so distant in outlook and custom from your own as England."

"But—*madre mia*, must I keep on saying it?—England is my country, as Spain is my country, as Africa is my country. My Mama, before her marriage, was actually a British subject—yes, I have had it explained to me: Grandfather married my African grandmother when Havana was British territory; Mama was very proud of her English blood, and I am proud of mine! Proud enough to claim that to which I am entitled—a place among you all, and the honour which is due to a family like this!

"I do not say I shall never go back to Cuba," she added, "but I mean to establish myself here, to give back its importance to Triton, so that I can hand it on——"

"To whom?"

"To my children, of course," said María Pía calmly. "I shall probably have sons, and what else have I to leave them? There will be nothing for them at Buonaventura, because Leonor's children will inherit there. But Bristol is like Havana: it is full of great opportunities. We shall perhaps build ships, and trade with foreign countries——"

"You will, I presume, be giving your children a father."

"Ah, now you laugh at me. I didn't expect that of you!"

"I do not laugh," said Pallas, "but now we have come to a subject so serious that, my dear, I can't discuss it with you for the present. Do you know I should have been doing a dozen things, instead of standing in the sun gossiping with you?" She stretched out her hand and touched the girl's cheek lightly with the tips of her fingers. "You think I'm a busy woman, don't you? Would it surprise you to know that I don't care for anything—much—except you and your happiness?"

María Pía did, for her, a surprising thing; she, who was so parsimonious of her caresses, turned quickly and took Pallas in her arms; the elder woman caught her breath as she felt herself drawn against the ripe young bosom, as María Pía's lips were pressed to her own.

"Did you love Grandfather *very* much?"

"... Yes."

"Ah, I am glad; for it means you will help me, won't you?"

"I will do everything I can."

Releasing her with another quick kiss, María Pía turned away, twitched a blossom of wild convolvulus from the wall and stuck it behind her ear; the faint mauve bell deepened in colour against the blue-black hair and golden skin.

"I am expecting a visitor this afternoon."

"Who?"

"A relative of yours: the señora Caroline Sax."

"Do you mean William's wife?" Suspicion flamed instantly in Pallas's mind; she felt the hand of Beaufort in this unexpected visitation.

María Pía nodded.

"*Más vale pájaro en mano que buitre volando!*" Her smile flashed. "You have that saying in English—no? I am very pleased to receive Doña Carolina; I wish it had been the old lady."

It took Pallas a second to realize that she was referring to Orabella. Ah,

well, for that she might wish in vain. "The old lady" (how Orabella would have resented the term!) had not answered Pallas's last two letters, and even Lionel hinted that she was out of favour with the *châtelaine* of Paragon. She understood; she had expected it when she took María Pía under her wing.

"I'm afraid I shan't know what to talk to her about!"

"You need not trouble; Caroline will do the talking—I take it she speaks French. I will be there," said Pallas slowly, "if you would rather not meet her alone."

"Thank you, I shall manage."

"You will have Madame Deschamps to support you."

"No, I shan't. I have promised to see her alone!" María Pía broke into her full-throated laughter at Pallas's apprehensive expression. "Do not make yourself anxious, señora! Although I have been entertaining none but gentlemen of late, I have not forgotten my manners in feminine society! It will be quite amusing, after so long, to meet one of my own sex."

"What do you think of Captain Hanson, María Pía?" asked Pallas suddenly.

"Think? *Madre mia*, it would be difficult to think anything! He plays a good hand of cards, and seems to believe he can sing. *Le pauvre* Deschamps, who is very musical, looks as though she had swallowed vinegar when *el capitán* favours us with his repertory. But it is not his fault, because it appears that *cet idiot d'un* Beaufort told him that we are very fond of music in Cuba, and he does his best to fill the hiatus here at Triton!" gurgled María Pía. "Well, I shall tell you all about it, every word, afterwards; and now perhaps I shall be invited to Paragon."

Pallas looked at the ground. She knew Caroline could be devilish.

"Well, I must go and get on with my work. Are you coming with me?"

"*Gracias!* I have promised Lionel to sit for him this morning." It was said, on a note of deliberate lightness, but Pallas's sharpened perception caught an inflection; her eyes flashed upward.

María Pía was standing in the sun, one foot advanced, with pointed toe, her weight thrown back upon the other; it was as though she leaned upon the sunlight. Between her lowered lashes her eyes held a drowsy smile and the stubborn lips were parted with an expectant sweetness that sent a shaft through Pallas's heart. A girl, waiting upon her lover. . . . God help us all, it is Lionel!

The shock was so great that she turned without speaking, and began slowly to walk towards the door, where Flora stood waiting, a book of accounts in her hand; at Pallas's approach she modestly vanished—it was not for any one to hasten Miss Burmester.

"Well, are you not wishing me good-bye?"

Pallas turned heavily. How handsome, and how shockingly like her grandfather the girl was! The height, the proud head, the sweet, haunting smile. Old Hercules Flood might be proud of his descendant—though God knows what he would have said to the distaff side.

"I think," she said slowly, "I could help you to feel that Triton is your own." She felt wicked; well, she was said to have no scruples where her schemes were concerned. She could, if she chose, make this girl a part of them; but had she the right to do it? If it were not she, it would be someone else; the heiress to Triton was a pigeon, waiting to be plucked; when once

she had mastered the language, and was able to exert her independence, Madame Deschamps' watchfulness would avail little against that headstrong temperament.

But if she wanted responsibilities, she, Pallas, could provide her with the right ones. The question was, how much authority was there in the background: at what point would that mysterious Cuban gentleman, Don Santiago de Lorch, exert himself to compel the return of an errant daughter, and could he compel it, short of kidnapping? There was something uncertain, fantastic about the whole situation—yet the law, apparently, admitted its regularity.

"I have been wanting for some time to ask you a favour; I wonder if you will do something for me."

"I hope it is important!" An eager brightness transfigured the sombre features.

"It is very important: not only to me, but to scores of poor people in Bristol. It is a thing which only you can do, and which will publicly mark your authority as owner of Triton. I want you," said Pallas deliberately, "to sign a paper giving me the use of these buildings for my hospital for as long as I may require them. I think I can promise it will not be long; if all goes well, we shall soon have a place of our own."

"But what need is there for such formality between us? I have already given you my word—"

"What is good enough for you and me, my dear, isn't good enough for Bristol. I shall be able to claim support which, at present, isn't forthcoming, if I am able to show people a document proving that there is a proper, legal agreement, entitling us to carry on our work on your premises until other accommodation is provided. You don't know us yet!" She laughed. "Bristol folk are cautious; they don't like to feel they're supporting an illegal procedure—which I suppose mine was when I seized your property."

"I should have done the same in your place." It was plain the suggestion gratified her, gave her pleasure. "Where is the paper? What have I to write on it?"

"I shall have to take you to see my lawyers; I can assure you they'll be very much relieved. Mr. Cornelius has done nothing but treat me as a criminal ever since we started, and it's very embarrassing for a respectable firm like that to feel they're acting for a criminal!"

"I thought that was what lawyers were for; you want to break the law; so you employ a lawyer to help you," said María Pía calmly. At this Cuban interpretation of the uses of the law Pallas laughed again.

"No wonder you and I get on well, my dear. God bless you; do you know you've done a very great thing?—and earned," she added, as though to herself, "a deal of gratitude." She took the girl's hand, and looked from the soft, pink palm into María Pía's eyes. "There's a lot of power in this hand of yours, and presently I shall show you how to use it." She wanted to add a warning, that María Pía should beware of others who might try to forestall her, but reflected that this might only confuse the girl and increase her feeling of mistrust. "You want to be English, do you? Well, you shall be English, and a Flood, and a good Bristolian!" She gave the hand a pat and relinquished it. "Thank goodness, I'm not without a little power of my own. We'll put it

together, you and I. You know, I'm going to use you; I do that with everybody, I'm afraid. Will you trust me?"

"You know I do."

Pallas thought: "I've given her something to think about; I've put a brake on. . . ." Yes, but would it hold? There was Beaufort's thin, powerful hand to be reckoned with; there was Lionel—of him, for the present, it was better not to think. Poor, poor Orry; how pitiful were her chances if those two young creatures took the bit into their teeth. But perhaps, so far, Lionel was not affected. She must try to use her confidence with him to find out.

As she went about her hospital duties, checking accounts, criticizing expenditure, reading reports and hearing complaints—not a few, for the patients, as they gained confidence, quickly grew captious, and she had to deal smartly with these—she tried in vain to unravel the mystery of Caroline's visit.

While she investigated the grumbles of an old crone of eighty, whose nurse complained she gave more trouble than the rest of the patients together, Flora came to her side.

"I'm very sorry to disturb you, ma'am, but there is a person at the door, says he wants to see you."

"You know I never see people while I am in the wards!"

"I said so, ma'am; but he persists—I can't get him to go away." Flora's face was still flushed with her recent struggle.

"If it is someone to be admitted, he must wait until the doctor's visiting hour. Really, Flora, I'm surprised——"

"No, it's not a patient," Flora interrupted; if there was a thing she could not endure it was the accusation of shortcoming in the exercise of her duty.

"He says his name's Bowling."

"What?"

"No, no, not the old one. It's a nephew—and, ma'am—he says it's of the greatest importance; I don't believe he's telling a lie."

"Perhaps not." The tone was tart, but the eyes had softened. "I suppose it's on account of the old man—poor soul. I can't do anything; I'm not even free this afternoon. . . . Tell him to bring me his news to-night; I'll be in any time after six."

The sergeant was waiting in the sun when Flora went out; despite the military stiffness of his bearing, the anxiety which struggled behind the crumpled red brow was evident. She gave her message. Nathaniel clenched his fists.

"For God's sake, miss, tell 'er it's a matter o' life an' death!" he burst out. "Tell 'er it's about the *Cassypeer*!"

CHAPTER XI

I

"I SHALL never succeed in painting you," Lionel was saying. The inflection of deep defeat was in his exhausted voice, when, at the end of an hour, he flung down his brushes.

How young he looked, with the fair hair ruffled on his brow, and his eyes sunk into their bony pits beneath the arches! She knew nothing of drawing, nothing of the elements that went to make that beauty, but she only felt he was completely beautiful, and a longing went through her to gather the white, young face to her bosom—so unaccustomed a yearning that it shocked her. She had never felt maternal towards any one—except, during the days of the latter's illness, to María Cayetúña; to feel maternal towards a man, a man of her own age, was so fantastic that it almost overwhelmed her.

She stretched herself on the couch upon which he was painting her, and held out her hand with a gesture of shyness. She felt suddenly very shy indeed—shy, and young, and tender: sensations which she believed herself utterly to have outgrown. After Madrid, who could be tender?—who could be young? It was not the sight of the marqués, lying in his blood, that had made her case her soul in iron; it had been the rush of realization of the danger that compassed them about; it had been the dagger-thrusts in the eyes which had once been falsely smiling and threw away their smiles with their pretences of friendship, now that the Montalbas stood face to face with the doom which so long had been preparing for them. It was the consciousness that she, and she alone, stood henceforward for strength in their bereaved little household: these things were enough to harden a girl, to take the youth out of her—without the brutal *volte-face* of society; and she knew, too late, that she had been wrong to refuse the patronage of the Queen.

She had the incredible longing to lean her cheek against the top of that fair head and cry: cry away all the bitterness, the retrospective horror, the fear and misery of the last twelve months; to lay her life and all she possessed in those long, sensitive hands and say, "Please take care of me—for ever!" But, being a Flood and a de Lorcha, she smiled instead, and stretched out her hand, hoping he might take it.

But Lionel was too sunk in his failure to see the gesture.

"Why do you find me so hard to paint?" she was asking in the deep voice that had a certain roughness in it. "I sit still, do I not?—and I give you all the help I can . . ."

"You are wonderful. . . Too wonderful for me," he muttered miserably. "And I think I won't try any more—for the present. Afterwards, when I've learnt more, I shall start again." But his wrists hung between his knees, flaccid with disappointment; even she, who was egoistic enough, realized the completeness of his withdrawal into the fortress of his artist soul, and this, in some fashion, pleased her. She appreciated independence; she accepted the proud, masculine apartness that rejected any attempt at infringement of

its self-imposed boundaries; and she felt the distinction between Lionel's suffering reserve and that chill, capricious secretiveness of Beaufort's.

"I will get you some wine," she said, and rose and left the room.

He knew what was the matter. The growing disturbance of his mind was driven like a wedge between his conception and its execution. She had drawn too close to his consciousness; he had lost his perspective, had got his vision of her all mixed up with a personal relationship which, existing only in his imagination, he strove, with ever-weakening resistance, to banish. He took the glass of wine from her hand, cursing softly because his own shook in the act.

"See how tired you are!" She forced her voice to lightness. "It is because you work too long, you do not take sufficient rest and exercise. And you should not be so secret about your work; how do you know whether it is good or bad? You should allow someone else to judge it for you."

He smiled faintly at this expression of her resentment of his refusal to let her look at the unfinished painting.

"I expect you are getting tired of sitting to me. I am sorry to have imposed on your good nature," he said, with a stiffness that was partly weariness, partly wounded pride.

"I assure you I am not at all a good-natured person!" she flashed back at him. "Come; supposing we walk a little in the garden. I have something about which I want to ask your advice."

Did her hand seek the crook of Beaufort's arm in just that same fashion? He knew he would die of misery unless he could find out.

They strolled down to the lily-pool, where little green frogs leapt about the slimy margin. The dark shield of the water mirrored them, and there was a delicate flutter of leafage overhead. Above them, the house raised its grave, grey forehead over the steep, green slope of the lawn.

"I suppose, according to English taste, this is a handsome house," she observed.

"It is more than handsome, it is very beautiful," he told her. "Don't you see how perfect the proportions are?—and the placing of those windows——"

"As beautiful as Paragon?" she interrupted him.

"Paragon is quite different: a different scale, a different conception. There's no way of comparing them. Each is excellent in its way."

"If I remain here I shall make improvements. For example, I don't like windows without balconies; I will have some balconies. And here—right along the front—I think I shall have a porch with pillars; will it not be agreeable to be able to sit there in the evenings—perhaps to dine—and to admire the view?"

He gazed at her with genuine horror.

"For God's sake, you can't do that! You will ruin the place."

"It is mine, is it not?" she inquired with hauteur.

"If it were a thousand times yours, you would not have the right to take a thing which is beautiful and bastardize it for your own amusement!" was the indignant rejoinder.

"Perhaps you will say I have not a right to my own taste, as you have to yours?" There was an edge in her short laughter. "*Muy bien*; but you, you see, are not master of Triton." She plucked her fan from the waist-

riband into which she had thrust it and cracked it open with a turn of the wrist. It was exquisite, thus to play at anger, in view of the reconciliation which must come! She prepared her submission, while darting fury at him with her eyes.

"If this was the matter on which you wanted my advice——!"

"*Pues*——?"

"You had better ask someone else who has no reverence for beauty!" Oh God, to be quarrelling with her, when all he wanted was to take her in his arms!

"*Bueno*; I shall ask Beaufort. He will perhaps be visiting me to-morrow." It was deliberately cruel; she watched, to see him flinch. His little bow was worthy, she was startled to reflect, of the elder Sax.

"I can think of no one who more admirably fills my description," was the biting rejoinder.

She paused, her head a little to one side.

"I think you are not very friendly—you and Beaufort. You never call on me together, which seems very odd, considering he always speaks of you with brotherly feeling. Well, that perhaps is a little exaggeration; but he at least does not avoid your name, as you appear to avoid his."

"Isn't it obvious why I avoid Beaufort's?"

She threw out her hands—a gesture of assumed mystification.

"Is anything obvious in this country? *Madre mia*, you are a strange nation!"

"Tell me something." Interrupting, he startled her with the cold whiteness of his look. "Do Beaufort's visits please you?"

"I should hardly entertain them, should I, if they did not?" But the sideways flick of her eye betrayed her awareness of treading on dangerous ground.

"Do you prefer them to mine?"

"What a question! And why?" she parried.

"Because," he stammered, "I th-think you will have to choose between the one or the other."

She stood stock still in her astonishment.

"What are you saying? That I should refuse to receive your brother?" she asked slowly, but her heart was thudding against her breast-bone. He was obstinately silent, and, appalled, she turned to cajolery. "But be reasonable, *mon cher*! How could I do that, when I owe so much—perhaps even my life—to him?"

"Has he not been paid?"

The awful words hung in the air between them, even their outrageous sound could not persuade Lionel that he had really spoken them, that they had not communicated themselves in silence from his soul to hers.

"*Paid*?"

As their meaning penetrated her mind, her whole face flamed; from muslin neckerchief to the roots of her black hair flowed the deep, unbecoming tide of crimson; she lifted her fan, and cut him across the face with it. As the ivory sticks snapped, a trickle of scarlet appeared under Lionel's cheek-bone; she saw it, smothered a sob—of rage, or pity, which?—and with her hand against his chest thrust him out of her way. At the next moment, with her

skirts caught about her knees, she was running up the steep slope of the lawn.

Madame Deschamps saw her from a window; saw also Lionel, to whom she beckoned imperiously. But he, seemingly, was blind; his stricken face, white like bone, with a red mark across it, was lifted towards his vanishing companion, and, if he saw Madame Deschamps' gesture, he ignored it. Turning on his heel, he walked rapidly away.

She had run round the corner of the house—straight into Beaufort. So unexpected was his appearance at this hour of the day that she could hardly believe it. She checked, drawn up on the balls of her feet, the folds of her skirt wragged up around her, so wild, so evidently beside herself that even Beaufort was taken aback.

He had yielded to an unusual impulse in coming thus, at an unconventional hour; a sleepless night had disturbed his usual calm self-confidence. He had begun to wonder, for the first time, whether his mode of procedure had been a mistaken one: whether she might have misunderstood his strict control for a lack of fervour; and, for the first time, he had cursed himself for a fool, that he had made no use of the many opportunities which had afforded during their flight across the north of Spain. In short, Beaufort's nerve had given way; and now, on the verge of the supreme test, he, the cold, self-satisfied gentleman, was torn with anxieties.

At least, he had told himself, cursing the valet who dressed him, he could get to her before Caroline saw her; could give her some unequivocal proof of his passion, let down, deliberately, the barrier he had imposed on their intercourse. Fool that he was—she, accustomed to the fiery advances of her fellow-countrymen, had probably been mystified by all this formality, at variance as it was with his words. He went giddy, and swayed before his glass, at the thought of touching her—her body, her lips, the casket of her exotic heredity: to drain all Afric and the Indies at a draught—this suddenly became the peak of his ambition, to which, in that febrile moment, he was ready to sacrifice all of the future. His disassociated mind told him that this was but a temporary madness; it gave him satisfaction, for once, to surrender to it. Let him but get to her now, with his desire upon him, and he would so infect, so assure her with his sincerity that she would agree to whatever Caroline might propose.

So for the second time that morning, María Pía came face to face with a burning lover, and, despite her own fury and agitation, was halted by the look in the other's face.

"What are you doing here?" she cried, hardly knowing what she was saying.

He threw a quick look round, muttered something unintelligible, and dragged her into his arms. Astonished, horrified, her head flung back, she gazed at him. The almost terrifying aliveness of that handsome mask fascinated and revolted her at the same time; she saw his lips straining towards hers, and, with the palms of her hands flat against his face, thrust it back from her. Each was so wild as almost not to know what they were doing; he was muttering insane pleas for her compassion, and his body shook as though with the ague. Never, in any of his amours, had he lost that vision

of himself, that proud self-consciousness which was always on guard against humiliation; and now, for the first time, he did not care.

"*Tus labios—tus labios, gloria mia! Reina de mi alma, te adoro!*" It was like lightning playing over her; she felt transfixed, numb, helpless, under a touch of fire. Still throbbing with the wound Lionel's words had dealt her, she found in Beaufort's surrender some evil compensation: a weapon placed in her hand for Lionel's destruction. She dragged herself out of his arms and stood panting.

"*Pues—tu me quieres, Beaufort!*" she gasped. "Then—then—give me your protection!"

"What else do I desire?" he muttered, his heart leaping. She was talking rapidly, with gestures of wild confusion, that he strove to check by capturing one of her hands and covering it with kisses; he hardly noticed what she was saying, until one word tore itself out of the tangle of her incoherencies and drained the heat from him, like the application of ice to the base of the spine. In that instant he was himself, the armour of discretion once more adjusted—though what it covered it were wiser not to reflect.

"Listen, *querida mia*." His hand burned, but was steady. "This afternoon you will see Caroline; she will explain all to you—all, that is to say, but the depth and extent of my sentiments regarding you, which need no explanation. You have seen—you know. . . . Be advised by Caroline, my beloved, and I assure you you shall never regret it. There will be paradise for you and me."

"But why," she inquired, trying to regain her self-control, "does *cette dame* have to come into it? If you and I are married, it surely concerns no one but ourselves—and perhaps your parents? My father will be told of it later; there is no need"—she forced a smile—"for us to apprehend his displeasure, since Tía Lucia will certainly assure him of your character!"

Beaufort's face stiffened.

"I must beg you, in this matter, to defer to my judgment, *querida mia*. Only remember that Caroline's visit is actuated by the utmost sentiments of goodwill, and by her affection not only for me, but for you, as the object of my passion."

"I have not found women so solicitous, as a rule, to the objects of others' passions!" she murmured, but he brushed the irrelevancy aside.

"If some part of what she has to say may seem painful to you, think only that I would part with every drop of blood in my body to spare you unhappiness, and think that Caroline's point of view is the world's point of view!" He checked himself, fearing that he was going too far. "I can leave it," he added, "to your own good taste and sense to accept and act on the advice she will give you."

Behind the cautious restraint of his words, she felt a touch of premonition; something within her sprang to the alert. But she concealed it; recovering herself, she touched her hair, found it disordered, dropped him a formal curtsy.

"You will excuse me, señor! I must arrange my appearance before receiving your sister-in-law."

It struck him for the first time that she had given him no explanation of the state of agitation in which he had found her; but he felt it prudent, for

the present, to prosecute no further inquiries. So he handed her to the house, and in the hall they met Madame Deschamps, who met him with a look of icy suspicion. He bowed ironically, reflecting, as he did so, that it would be easy enough, when the time came, to dispose of the Frenchwoman; a hint dropped here and there was enough to rouse opinion against a woman of enemy nationality; he could even, at a pinch, succeed in getting her deported. Yes, Madame Deschamps might well discover that it paid in the long run to further her benefactor's plans.

II

The cell to which he had been transferred was not much larger than his previous lodging, but there was light and air; so much light that, at first, it was painful. He had to sit in a corner, beneath the window, hiding his eyes: allowing a little, then a little more, of the dusty sunlight to penetrate through the shield of his fingers. His eyes were very sore, and ran continually with moisture, but after a few days this condition cleared up; he could look about him, at timbered walls, the interstices between the beams filled with rough plaster, scrawled in places with obscene symbols and drawings.

He could see, for the first time, the loathly condition of his own body: of pores pitted with grime and knuckles that shone with the dirt encrusted on them, of nails like talons, black with filth. He made attempts to wash in the water that was given him for drinking—for now, owing to some new regulations, the prisoners were served with sufficient liquid to absolve him of his dependence on drinking-water; he lapped the thin, tasteless gruel and kept the water for his toilet. But each day the indecent condition of his person forced itself upon him, and there were moments when, whimpering, he implored his jailers to restore him to his underground hiding-place, where at least he was spared consciousness of his disgusting state. Such pleas inevitably roused much amusement, and he learned not to make them; but when any one visited his cell, he was covered by so deep a sense of shame that he invariably rose and stood with his face to the wall until the visitors had gone.

His original dread had been of losing the use of his limbs in the course of his long confinement. The labours to which he had been condemned by his Moorish captors were, in retrospect, infinitely desirable, in comparison with this endless inertness, which, in his cupboard below-stairs, it had been impossible to relieve; here, in the new quarters, one could at least stand up, stretch and bend oneself. The stiffness of the joints at first made all movement agony, but he began, at last, to gain some control of his muscles—such as remained; and on a day when he managed to straighten his spine and remain for several seconds in the upright position of a human being, he gave thanks to God.

He had become much quieter, and was no longer considered a danger among the other lunatics, among whom he was now set free for a portion of each day; but he had no fancy for this concession and would have resisted it; it was the guardians who insisted upon it for their own convenience. He was permitted on one occasion to clean his cell; the bucket and mop were

supplied, and he laboured all day, but there was not enough water and his efforts did not come to much. He slept afterwards, and had a dreadful nightmare; from which he awoke, clanging on the bucket with the handle of the mop and yelling so that the door burst open and two men rushed in at him: he fought them, and was overpowered; they put him in chains for twenty-four hours—to save themselves trouble. He tried to explain himself, in the jumble of languages that followed the outbreaks of physical fury. Apart from this he talked little; there was no point in talking to people who did not understand one; and he knew quite clearly, by now, what was the matter with him. He had lost his memory.

But the loss was not complete: that was the puzzling thing about it. Certain scenes, certain incidents stood out as clearly from the past as though they had been printed on the wall: living pictures, complete in ever detail of movement, colour and even odour. A river, with its banks festooned with flowers; a patch of shade, broad and cool as an enormous leaf, its edges bitten away by a ravenous sun, and a stink of cheroots and palm oil; a frescoed apartment, with a balcony, and pots of basil on the carved rail. Against such settings moved a host of indistinct figures; sometimes a face would leap out at him, he would give a shout of recognition—but before the thought could be crystallized it was gone. There was China Ben's face, grinning, chewing tobacco, or the bestial jowl of Charlie—these were close, blotting out his visions; he hated them. These were his enemies; put a pistol in his hand and he could dispose of the pair of them—a pistol? He saw two long slender weapons, with handles of silver and mother-of-pearl, lying in a bed of moss-green velvet; he could even feel their weight, their perfect balance in his hands—and he saw a stretch of bleached sand and some palm trees, and a man grinning at him from a stump on which he was sitting, smoke trickling from his left hand and a split, silver-knobbed malacca quivering away to the right. Suddenly such a wave of frustration, rage and murderous hatred swept across him that he reeled under it; he opened his mouth, a name jammed on his tongue, vanished on a groan that was half a howl.

Another time, it was night; the hospital had settled down to its night-time quietude, and the only sound was that of a solitary voice which went trolling on with a tuneless, bibulous reiteration. At first the ditty wove itself into his dreams; there was a creak in it like that of cordage, an even rhythm like that of the sea. But evidently the singer grew weary of repetition and sought to vary the monotony by hoarse shouts and admonitions of his shadowy or maybe imaginary companions.

Matthew awoke; he was cramped, and there was a patch of moonlight on the floor. And in that patch an object took shape which at first he could not recognize; then, as the light seemed to grow stronger, he saw what it was—a hand, with the broad back and knuckles netted with blue, and a mermaid's round breasts and fish-tail caught in the net. Slowly the rest became visible: a thick, powerful arm, broad shoulders, and at last the head—broad, beaming face ringed with a flaming beard, and an eye that winked like a ship's lantern.

"By Christmas! If it an't my old friend Matthew Flood!"

He gave a great cry, flung himself forward—and found himself alone. But at last he had got something—a name! His name? Ay, perchance: but

whoever it belonged to must now have the chance to claim it while it remained in the precarious net of his memory.

China Ben, playing at fan-tan down in the porter's lodge, heard the thud of blows aimed at a wooden door, grunted and spat across his shoulder. His companions snickered, nudged each other and puffed smoke into each other's faces; it was enviously felt that China Ben earned his money easy. Two shillings a night—for playing fan-tan! That was what it amounted to. No need for old China to stir his stumps at this hour of the night, with Charlie out on the spree and the Governor snoring in his house across the yard.

But even the fan-tan enthusiasts were forced to suspend their activities when the windows of the men's ward on the first floor were broken open from within and the voices of the patients started shouting across the yard: "Help! Murder! Fire! Help! Help!"

Stupid with beer and tobacco, China Ben, cursing, went rolling out under the stars. Outside the locked gates he heard running feet, the inquiring shouts of the watch, a faint flicker of lanterns danced up the walls. "What's ado? Ho, there, open!" In a minute, God help them, the Governor would be awake—there'd be hell to pay for the lot of them—in his tipsy agitation China Ben began to run backwards and forwards like a distracted fowl in Purgatory yard, unable to make up his mind whether to hasten to the wards, which were evidently in turmoil—now, damnation, there were the women squealing!—or to make up the narrow, outer stair which led to the lunatics' quarters. To hell with Charlie—what for did he have to sneak out after that long-toothed whore of his when there was none but China Ben and the two cronies on the women's side to keep order in the place? A man with but one serviceable arm shouldn't be left responsible for a crew like this.

His companions, edging out, staring up at the windows, were getting uneasy. "Hey, China—get on with yer business! We don't want the Corsican down amongst us—a-spoilin' of our pretty faces!"

While he cursed and faltered, with many doubtful glances at the Governor's house—at the closed windows behind which, at the side of his lawful spouse, that worthy was virtuously snoring—another sound reached the listeners' ears. Along the cobbles of the street came the rumble of a coach, the splatter of horses' hoofs, the crack of a whip. There came a battering at the gate; China Ben's heart missed a beat—now here was a nice to-do, with Charlie away and all the responsibility on his defenceless shoulders. He ran towards the stairs, while the battering increased; a mob was gathering, there was a growling tumult of voices pierced by an occasional feminine shriek; inside there was babel, outside a growing pandemonium. Suddenly a fist, apparently more powerful than the rest, smote the creaking wood.

"Hi, there! Open! 'Tis his worship Master Peddy!"

CHAPTER XII

I

A KNOT of loungers outside the Rose and Harp tavern scattered as a horse broke from a side alley into the broad village street. The beast was exhausted, dark with sweat and flecked with foam; the rider, all but lying on its neck, seemed in no better condition than the steed, which stumbled on a cobble and was gashed into recovery by the merciless application of the spur, which had already ploughed the sleek flank into furrows of matted crimson. There were shouts and instant rumours of invasion: the cottages emptied their occupants in a trice into the dusty street, and while all was yet in turmoil, a yokel came shambling from the direction in which the horse and its rider had vanished. His arm sawed the air vaguely in the direction of Paragon oaks.

"It be Lord Lionel! 'E be in a main hurry—'e dooesn't wait for the gates—'e's joomped th' 'edgerow!"

It was thus, galloping across the fields, that Lionel missed the family coach as it rolled staidly down the drive with his sister-in-law inside and, a few moments later, down the street, where hats were doffed and curtsseys dutifully dropped to Lord William's lady.

Grooms in the stables stared as Lionel's horse, riderless, trotted in, lathered with sweat; someone went running to find what had become of the rider, and were reassured by a gardener who had seen his lordship slip from the saddle and go limping up to the house—"an' a rare state 'e wur in—wi' blood on 'is face an' 'is neckcloth a-flyin' away from 'is shoulders!"

The young gentlemen were out shooting, and Lord Mildenhall was away. On one of the lawns Lady Aurora played with her little girls, and paid anxious visits from time to time to the summerhouse where Perry, smothered in blankets, dying as much from the heat as from the disease in his poor little body, was lying. Orabella, a broad garden hat on her head and gloves on her hands, was arguing with the head gardener about the unauthorized pruning of some flowering currant which, she declared, had ruined the view from her window. Lionel, who had taken in the scene from a distance, gave thanks for his mother's absorption in her arguments; he must get to his room and order his appearance before dealing Orabella the blow of her life. His lips were white and his jaw set as he stole into the house and up a side stair.

For he had made his decision and there could be no departure from it. He had made it in a flash, between his speaking of the fateful words and María Pía's frenzied reception of them. He had known then that he loved her beyond all reason; that whether or not she was Beaufort's mistress, he loved her and must have her for his own. So certain was he that even the revelation of the falseness of his suspicions had hardly relieved him. How he was to gain her forgiveness he yet hardly knew; he had not had time to think about it. But before he went about it, Orabella must know; she must accept or reject

it—either course could have no influence upon his future actions. But, if it was the last tribute he could offer her, she must not be allowed to feel that he had excluded her from his confidence in the most vital step he had ever taken in his life.

All the most sensitive part of him shrank as he faced, mentally, the coming scene. He knew how formidable Orabella could be in her emotional outbursts, and his hands trembled as he changed his clothes, bathed the clotted blood from his cheek and affixed a strip of plaster. It was a mercy she had not observed his entrance, for his appearance had been shocking; now, with his hair smoothed, clean linen and the stained riding suit changed for more formal array, he told himself he looked normal; it did not strike him that the face which peered at him from his bedroom mirror had aged by ten years since the morning.

But it struck Orabella. The servant whom Lionel had dispatched to announce his arrival could not keep pace with Lady Mildenhall as she swept into the drawing-room, her face rosy and a little shiny with the sun, her eyes blazing with excitement and delight at Lionel's unexpected return.

"And what have I to thank for this very charming surprise?" she was beginning, all sparkle and coquetry as she invariably was in the presence of the male—and broke off, to catch him by the shoulder and turn him abruptly to the light. Her face drained itself of youth; he saw for the first time—and it shocked him—his mother truly looked her age, and moved instinctively to protect her with his arms. "Lionel, what is the matter? What have you been doing?"

She felt him holding her, and—so deadly sure is the maternal instinct—she felt in his embrace no longer the romantic chivalry, the adoring tenderness of a devoted son, but the sad, implacable kindness of a grown man, whose consciousness brushed her only with its outer fringe.

II

Behind a façade of misgiving, of pursed lips and shakings of curls. Lady William Sax was flattered by the confidence her brother-in-law reposed in her. Beaufort was the only member of the family—apart, of course, from William—with whom she "got on"; Lord Mildenhall's gentle politeness discomfited her, Orabella she loathed and made fun of behind her back—a compliment returned by Orabella, one may be sure, in full measure. Unfortunately, Lady William's witticisms at the expense of the "little, jumped-up tradesman's daughter" did not go down with people who had the advantage of Lady Mildenhall's acquaintance: a Very Distinguished Person had given it as his opinion that there was more aristocracy in Orabella's little finger, wool trade or no wool trade, than in the whole of her daughter-in-law's over-bedizened body. Peregrine had mocked her; Lionel, in his mild fashion, ignored her. No wonder Caroline hated Paragon, pouted and was peevish, when William warned her that, as a matter of policy, it was time they spent a week or two "in the country." And this time there was Beaufort's letter to hasten his persuasions.

She and Beaufort understood each other; their ambitions differed, but

each displayed the same unscrupulousness in their pursuit; in each was the same contempt for simplicity, the same scorn for morals, save as a matter of social expediency. It is more than likely he despised her: as he despised any person who wore too openly his heart—or what passed for the same—on his sleeve. Caroline's passion was social advancement; she did not care who knew it.

But it is useful to have at one's beck and call someone who has a point of vulnerability: to know that point, and to be able to exert pressure at one's will. Beaufort's pockets were filled—as his sister-in-law knew well—with introductions; it paid to be agreeable to him—and Caroline, on several occasions, had been something more than agreeable. They had sealed their present bargain in a fashion acceptable to both, and it pleased Beaufort's sour sense of humour to reflect how easily, if he choose, he might cuckold William.

No doubt also Caroline was pleased as she drove to Bristol with the equivalent of an invitation to Carlton House in her pocket. The visit, ostensibly, was to the chymist: Lady William's maid was accused, unwarrantably, of having forgotten to pack a sufficient supply of her ladyship's ointments; and at the last moment there had been an awkward interlude when Lady Mildenhall suddenly recalled her need of a certain wool for her tapestry, which offered also the pretext for a pleasant drive. At the back of Orabella's mind was, also, a surprise visit to Lionel's lodgings; he had not come home the previous week-end; a message had arrived, making some excuse for his absence, and sending Orabella into a flaming rage which was only the pale reflection of the pain in her heart. For once and all she would know what Lionel was up to!

Then, mercifully, had intervened the affair of the flowering currants which Lady Mildenhall had espied at the very moment she turned on her heel to summon her maid and prepare for her drive. The coach rolled away with Caroline in lonely glory—and a new Mandarin pelisse—inside.

She was not lacking in confidence. Her father having been attaché at the Paris Embassy when she was a child, Caroline chattered French like a magpie and had no fears of being unable to make herself understood by Beaufort's foreign inamorata. It tickled her that she, who had enjoyed his favours, should be bound on this mission—precisely the kind of intriguing affair in which she delighted. Beaufort ought to be mightily beholden to her!—and she would see he remained conscious of it. It charmed her also to feel that she was cheating Orabella—silly old woman, trying to keep all her sons in leading strings. She—Caroline—had put a stop to that, at any rate so far as William was concerned: though sometimes she had to give him a little twitch to remind him who was mistress.

She had tried in vain to trap Orabella into discussion of Beaufort's affairs, with which, she vowed, all London was agog; but for all her usual volubility Lady Mildenhall could be as mum as a fish when she liked, and in any case disliked Caroline far too heartily to take her into her confidence. So Caroline had to chatter with her husband and, cunningly, with Captain Brough Hanson. . . .

She was used to moving in the *beau monde*, and she would have said that no personality, however illustrious, had power to overawe her; she admitted

to no discomposure in her manner of encountering María Pía de Lorchá—but she could not quite conceal her astonishment.

What a towering giantess of a creature!—and might be royalty from the loftiness of her bearing. No doubt she felt awkward, which would account for the stiffness, the unsmiling hauteur of her greeting, spoken in correct but harsh-sounding French. The *dame de compagnie*, or whatever she called herself, was more gracious, more civilised; but while the introductions passed, Caroline had a touch of misgiving; it was going to be more difficult than she had imagined. She stiffened her narrow spine; for goodness' sake, the girl was only a quadroon! A fine thing if Lady William Sax was going to allow herself to be intimidated by a creature with slaves' blood in her veins!

Presently they were alone in the seldom-used parlour, which María Pía had arranged with great elaboration for the reception of her visitor—transporting thither all that seemed to her most rich and impressive in the house, with the result that the elegant, austere room had lost most of its character and bore, to the critical eye of Caroline, an *arriviste*, ostentatious air which surprised her. Did Beaufort really like this kind of thing? Or was he so much under the sway of his passion that all in his charmer's vicinity seemed perfect in his eyes?

María Pía hid her great interest and curiosity behind lowered lashes, keeping her fan—a necessary adjunct to her composure—in movement. Honestly, she was not impressed by this little, pale-eyed Englishwoman, but she was prepared to be agreeable to her; this Doña Carolina was, after all, an ambassador from Paragon, the first formal sign of friendliness she had received from the family. She wondered if her gown was sufficiently striking, if her *maquillage*—much heavier than usual—was correct. She had found herself so pallid, so heavy-lidded and dark under the eyes, that layers of paint had been necessary to cover her haggard appearance, and paint, as we have seen, still did not become her; it aged her, took the light out of her expression and made it artificial.

"*Chère mademoiselle!*" Caroline was saying, mouthing her French in the exaggerated fashion which was considered modish in Society, "I cannot say how much I appreciate it that you should receive me—in private, without formality, as though we were old friends!"

"I hope we shall become friends, madame." A silly, frivolous woman; and how plain she was, with those long front teeth! No eyelashes, either; she must be very rich—such a woman would have no chance of marrying unless she brought her husband a large dowry.

"Of course we are friends already," fluttered Caroline. "There is something so attractive, so sympathetic about you, I felt drawn to confide in you from the first moment of our meeting. You will permit it, will you not?"

"Decidedly she is a little crazy," thought María Pía, inclining her head. Or perhaps this was the English manner?

"So strange—so difficult—for a foreigner—this life of ours! And, of course, so barbarous, here in the country. Ah, do not deny it to me—who know Paris like the palm of my hand!" (She had left it when she was six.) "There one lives; after that it is suffocation! Still, if one must suffocate there are less pleasant places in which to do it than London. I implore—nay, I insist—that you pay me a visit there at the first possible moment."

Presently she was speaking of Beaufort.

"Ever since he spoke of you I have been mad to make your acquaintance." There was sharpened attention in the pale eyes; Caroline's hand advanced, to lie on the back of María Pía's. "No wonder he is crazy about you! Poor fellow, he is quite beside himself; it tortures him to be absent from you, if only for a moment."

Could it be true, then, that he had actually sent his sister-in-law to plead his suit? Her pride was touched; her eyes smouldered resentment. *Por dios*, this at least was unnecessary, after their conversation of the morning.

Caroline hitched her chair a little forward and began to speak rapidly. At first María Pía could not imagine what it was all about: a mixture of protestations of admiration, assurances of sympathy—for what?—meaningful looks and nods, even touches, from which, presently, the younger girl did not attempt to conceal her shrinking. She was suddenly aware of a positive aversion to Caroline Sax, a dislike for everything about her—her thin, small, foxy face, a little like Asunción Gamborena's, the perfume she used, her affected, jerky movements, her assumption of an intimacy that long acquaintance would hardly have warranted. There was something unseemly in the lowered tones of her voice, a look, at times almost amounting to a leer, in the eyes over which the pinkish lids fluttered continually. No one had ever spoken to María Pía in this fashion, and the daughter of Santiago de Lorcha began to feel, without understanding, an insult behind the elder woman's veiled sentences.

"But how unnecessary it is to speak of such matters with a person of your experience!—and when I use the word experience I mean it, of course, in the most exalted sense. Certain things are evident"—she made a gesture whose meaning entirely escaped María Pía. "No, no, I wish only to save you the least little shadow of embarrassment, to make all as easy as persons of taste and discretion know how to make it. A little arrangement, *chère mademoiselle*—some understanding, such as no doubt already exists between you and my brother-in-law—who is above all a man of honour, and considers only your future welfare, which he is prepared to go to the utmost lengths to secure!—and all must be satisfactory to both—or should I say to all three—parties. I must ill have expressed myself if you suppose he wishes any personal sacrifice—whether of your personal inclinations or of your reputation. As an unmarried woman such liberties are not for a moment to be considered: but, under the protection of a married name—"

"Of what, señora"—she had risen—"are you speaking?"

"*Voyons, Mademoiselle de Lorcha*—!"

"You will excuse me: as you know, French is not my native tongue; there are differences in our pronunciation. I, perhaps, am stupid. I have not understood what you are trying to say to me."

Caroline suppressed an exclamation of impatience; the girl indeed was stupid! She forced one into some blunt declaration, some indelicacy of plain speaking—the very thing a woman of breeding would wish to avoid. She gave the girl a reproachful look which María Pía returned, stony-eyed.

"Surely, mademoiselle, I make myself clear?"

"Not to me, madame," was the uncompromising rejoinder.

Caroline moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue—a tongue capable,

as her acquaintances knew, of dropping vitriol: for the present it was distilled in honey. She tried another tack.

"It was my brother-in-law's greatest wish that you should receive Captain Brough Hanson favourably, and he charges me particularly with the expression of his deep appreciation of your kindness and sensibility." It struck María Pía for the first time that all Caroline's sentences had been embroidered with the captain's barbarous-sounding name. "How true your instincts must be, mademoiselle!—for a sweeter, better-disposed being never existed, nor one more tactful and unobtrusive. He is the essence of all that is *recherché*, his connections are impeccable, as a soldier his gallantry is unimpugned!"

She could speak with no more ardour, María Pía was thinking continuously, if *el capitán* were her paramour.

"You are so young, so alone! You will allow me to advise you, will you not? Not that I would have you act contrary to your inclinations: but we have, all of us, on occasions—alas!—to bow to the inscrutable dispensations of Providence, and the fortune lies with those who succeed most skilfully in adapting themselves to conditions which they themselves are unable to influence." She paused to flicker her lashes at María Pía. "*Chère mademoiselle*," she cooed, "would it not be possible for you to give the captain a yet more signal mark of your favour?"

"I thought"—she groped her way painfully through the unaccustomed sound of the words—"you had come to speak to me of your brother-in-law."

"In another minute," thought Caroline, "I shall expire of exasperation." She surrendered her attempts at diplomacy, which so evidently failed to register on this difficult young woman.

"Mademoiselle de Lorcha: it is the most unfortunate thing in the world that my brother-in-law cannot marry you."

After an instant's pause she heard herself say:

"For him—or for me?"

Caroline brushed the levity aside.

"Knowing him, you must realize the pangs he suffers in resigning his dearest wish to the inexorable claims of duty."

"*Pues, señora*——" In her confusion she stumbled into Spanish

"I have it from his own lips that he can love none but you, and the compromise I have come to offer is made possible only by our implicit confidence in the honour of Captain Hanson, for which my husband, his oldest friend, is prepared to vouch."

She felt the sticks of her fan wet between her fingers.

"*Por dios*, what is all this about?"

"Why," said Caroline, her head on one side, her manner gruesomely coquettish, "do you not marry Captain Hanson? *Attendez, ma chère*: it would be a marriage, obviously, in name alone. You would be free, in all things, to follow your own wishes: that, indeed, is the essence of the contract. You would have your own house in town—conveniently placed for the embassies; his military duties would, of course, necessitate the frequent absence of your husband—in places to which a woman of fashion could not be expected to remove herself. You would have a *dame de compagnie*—an Englishwoman, my dear, whom I would be charmed to procure for you: someone of discretion and experience who could advise you on all the

etiquette of English society—in which, as Captain Hanson's wife, you would naturally take your place."

"And who has had this wonderful idea, madame? Is it yours, or your brother-in-law's?" She was quite cold; the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet had turned to ice, and she dared not move because of the numbness in her limbs.

"You're not offended, are you?" cried Caroline with mock solicitude. "Come, what can the poor creature do? He is demented about you! He is anxious not to involve you in any equivocal situation; and in your place, mademoiselle"—with a touch of malice—"I should be flattered and honoured by the tender regard he displays for your comfort! As the wife of a distinguished regimental officer, your position would be secure; naturally, good taste and discretion will govern whatever liberties you choose to permit yourself. Some men might be indifferent: it is surely a mark of his high esteem that he proposes this way of removing the slightest slur on your character!"

"There is no question of removing, madame, that which does not exist!"

"Now you really are offended," complained Caroline. "How can I assure you that we all—Beaufort, myself, and, of course, Brough Hanson, whose respect for you and deep regard for my brother-in-law dispose him only to your service—wish you nothing but the best?"

"I find it curious, in the circumstances, that Monsieur Beaufort should not make his own propositions, and even more curious that these should include a third person."

"Come, mademoiselle!—you are not so simple——!"

"Simple? I?" Her lip curled. "In my country, madame, women are not simple. It is not to accuse myself of simplicity to inquire, *par exemple*, why a gentleman who has shown me a certain attention should engage himself to procure me a husband?"

Caroline was silent, biting her lip.

"You do not choose to explain yourself, madame?"

She was suddenly infuriated by the girl's hauteur.

"Naturally, mademoiselle, I understand that you are very disappointed," she said maliciously. "But, come now—confess! You could never seriously have imagined that you might marry a Sax?"

She was for a moment as thunderstruck as she had been by Lionel's infamous sentence. Her hand went to her throat, where she had a sensation of strangling; Caroline saw the gesture, and pressed home her advantage.

"Why not accept the inevitable with good grace and marry someone who will not interfere with the present situation between yourself and my brother-in-law? Hanson is to be trusted; it would certainly distress Beaufort to interrupt his relationship with you, but——"

She had partly regained her self-control; she understood at last the motive of Caroline's visit, and, outraged as she was, summoned all the resources of her pride to meet the other woman's insults.

"I am much obliged to you, madame, for your solicitude for my future welfare! You will perhaps convey this to your brother-in-law on my behalf? He and you must indeed have been exercising your brains to devise this solution of a problem which I had not known existed!"

"Now, pray don't be bitter, my dear creature!" Caroline was a little flustered; she did not want to have to report failure to Beaufort. "We have naturally the highest regard for you—not only on Beaufort's account, but for your personal qualities, which, if I may say so, are sufficiently evident to justify his passion." Even she herself heard the tang of patronage in the words, and hurried on before the other could reply. "But you know what it is, with these ancient families——" she ended confusedly. María Pía's dark, ironic stare did nothing to abate the confusion.

"Perhaps I know more than you do about ancient families, madame!" A shot at a venture and it drew blood: Caroline's face crimsoned; it was true her paternal grandfather had been nothing more than a little City attorney—a fact the family conspired to shroud in mystery. María Pía saw that she had scored. "You amuse me, madame! For it would seem that you have based all your plans on my behalf on a very thin assumption. Why should you or any other person assume that I would be willing to marry your brother-in-law? And as for *ce capitaine*—you will excuse me!—but I find it too fantastic!" Her loud laughter completed the destruction of Caroline's composure. To be laughed at by a quadroon! . . .

"You may laugh, mademoiselle! I can only say that, if you propose to make your home in England you will find it necessary to safeguard your reputation!"

"Ay, what a to-do you make about my reputation! Is yours, madame, so secure that you have nothing to do but trouble about other people's?" It was a dangerous taunt; she saw the other woman's eyes snap, her skinny features thicken with rage.

"At least my children were *white*!" she hissed.

In the second that followed Caroline Sax knew fear, physical fear, for the first time in her pampered life. She watched, with the hypnotism of terror, the reaction of the girl opposite to her—the curious enlargement of the pupils, so that the deep brown iris surrounding them was swallowed in the flood of black: the dilation and quivering of the nostrils and swelling of the lips that accompanied an ominous darkening of the whole face: a resurgence of African blood, which Caroline was never thenceforward to forget: which she described, when she lay panting against her husband's shoulder—much to the entertainment of the downright and unimaginative William.

"The creature turned into a nigger before my very eyes!"

Sheba's granddaughter was remembering tales she had heard about the *obeah*: certain superstitions she had learned from the plantation negroes about the evil eye; punishments inflicted in vengeance by the black people on their enemies; and the granddaughter of de Lorchas was remembering that to destroy an enemy you must first smile upon him. . . . The smile she gave Caroline Sax froze the latter's thin blood as she raised her hands and performed a gesture to which her English staff had hardly yet accustomed itself: the hard, clear pistol-shot of her palms reached, however, the ears of Madame Deschamps, who, full of misgiving about this interview from which she was excluded, was pacing the small ante-room beyond the parlour. She realized, as she quickly opened the door, that her apprehensions had fallen short of the reality.

"Show this white scum out of my house." María Pía spoke in Spanish,

but her tone was sufficient to convey to Caroline the insult which was intended. She tossed her head as she launched a parting shot at Madame Deschamps.

"I don't felicitate you, ma'am, on your situation!"

"Ma chérie, qu'est ce que t'arrive?"

María Pía gently laid her hands on her dueña's shoulder and pressed her towards the door; the livid smile still lingered about her lips. As Madame Deschamps turned her distressed face, her imploring hands towards her, María Pía closed the door upon her and locked it. She leaned for a moment against the carved jamb and lifted her hands to her head.

Then, moving like a somnambulist, she crossed the room and dragged back the curtain which covered a little alcove into which the impedimenta of Lionel's painting had been lifted. Everything was there: the still wet canvas, the disordered rainbow of the palette, the mahlsticks and brushes with their bristles still clogged with the paint. She had been amused at the care he took of his brushes: had watched him cleaning them with turpentine, scrutinizing the metal crowns for the slightest trace of coagulation among the roots—such meticulousness had seemed an amiable exaggeration, for which she teased him: while he laid emphasis on the importance of purity in colour, and wasted much of one of his clear pale yellows in showing her the difference of pigment laid on with a clean brush and with a dirty brush. She had come to regard each one of his implements as part of himself—although she had hardly realized it until to-day, and, as she picked up one of the palette knives, a shock went through her as though she made contact with the arm and living flesh.

Yet it was Lionel who had thrust the first sword into her heart, leaving a wound by which Caroline Sax's stab at her pride was almost nothing. Because she loved him, the power was his to wound her to the death—and, indeed, the life-blood seemed to be ebbing out of her as she looked upon the portrait which would never be finished.

III

Paragon was in chaos; Lord Mildenhall at the bedside of his wife, who lay in a state of coma, while they awaited the arrival of the doctor from Bath. Lionel, with whom he had a short but painful conversation, was locked in his room, packing all of his possessions he could lay hands on; for he knew that when—or if—his mother ever came to her senses there would be no future place for him at home. She had choked and fallen in the middle of her curses on him, and for a moment he thought he had killed her; even in his moment of agony he had thought of María Pía—of the time which must elapse before he could get back to her and make his act of contrition.

Beaufort had had an interview—hysterical on her part—with Caroline on her return and had retired with exemplary tranquillity to his own study. He had not the least doubt of being able to put the matter right on his next visit to Bristol; Caroline—to whom he was careful to allow no pretexts for satisfaction—had at least cleared the air, made plain a situation it would have been awkward to clarify on his own behalf.

Neither he nor the others knew what had caused Orabella's sudden illness, although Beaufort was sagacious enough to connect it with Lionel's unexpected return, no doubt with some new hare-brained scheme—possibly taking him farther afield even than Bristol, and removing Orabella's idol even more irrevocably from her vicinity. Beaufort was not ill pleased by the prospect—although he would not stoop to jealousy of one whom he felt to be not merely his junior but in every way his inferior, he was not enthusiastic about those frequent visits to Triton. He was making, for once, a mistake common to men of his kind: despising a rival, he discounted his powers of rivalry. Pride was his downfall; but, not knowing this, he was peaceful. He might even offer Lionel twenty pounds for the portrait when it was finished.

Caroline, William and Captain Brough Hanson were collected uneasily in one of the drawing-rooms, Caroline still inclined to be hysterical, William, to do him justice, more perturbed about his mother's illness than his wife's bungling of their schemes. The Captain was sombre; his horizon, which had recently been lightened by the prospect of clearing off some of his debts, was once more overcast, and the recollection of some definite promises he had made weighed on what he presumably called his conscience. It looked as though he might not, after all, secure his anticipated prize; he was sombre, and his dinner—no doubt on account of his mental disturbance—had not agreed with him.

"If Mama an't better to-morrow," William was mumbling, "I'll ride into Bristol and fetch aunt Pallas."

"Why?" snapped Caroline, who had a wholesome dislike for Miss Burmester. "Aurora's here—what's the use of filling the house up with women?"

"Rory's got her hands full enough already with Perry; she an't got time to spare for Mama. Damme if I know what it's all about," grumbled William, "and it seems it an't any good asking Lionel. I suppose"—he stared at Hanson with one of those unexpected touches of sapience with which he sometimes alarmed his family—"young Lionel an't been fussin' about with Beaufort's nigger?"

"Do not be so ridiculous!" fumed Caroline. "A less attractive creature I never saw, and not at all the kind of person to attract any one like Lionel."

"It an't so uncommon for painters to fall in love with their models," pointed out William, frowning with unwonted intelligence.

"If you wish to drive Beaufort out of his mind you have certainly hit on the proper way to do it!" Caroline contemptuously damped the idea down. Would Beaufort stand by his promises? She had done the best she could.

"If you ask me," pursued William, who, in his cups, was capable of holding on to a line of thought with more pertinacity than he ever achieved when sober, "it was a dam' silly way to go about it. After all, the girl's only half a nigger: the other part of her's Spanish, and these Spaniards, most of 'em, are as proud as Lucifer."

"Indeed! And how many Spaniards have you known?" scoffed Caroline. Her husband exchanged a broad wink with Hanson, which the latter was too preoccupied to return.

"And if Miss de Lorcha's a person of consequence in her own country,

it an't likely she'll be flattered by Caroline's suggestion she an't good enough for Saxes," elucidated William.

"Perhaps you'd be gratified if you were presented with a coal-black nephew?"

William started, stared, chuckled, and finally burst into a roar of laughter.

"If I was, I'd give the little beggar to aunt Pally to look after! He'd be her great-nephew, wouldn't he? The family's got to stand by each other in cases like these."

"You are a fool," Caroline told him furiously, "and I for one would never call the creature sister-in-law—though, of course," she said, recollecting herself, "I'd go out of my way to be agreeable to your wife, Brough."

"Damned good of ye, Caroline," grunted that individual. "And when we're married, I'll hold you to your promise."

Although her conversation with Maria Pfa had shaken her sense of security, Caroline roused herself to rally her fellow-schemer.

"For goodness' sake, don't be so gloomy! And you had better prepare yourself for a visit to Triton to-morrow and make the most of your opportunities. She may be a little peevish at the suggestion you're marrying her only to oblige Beaufort; I declare the creature so confused me I may, unintentionally, have made it appear that way. But you are a bigger fool than I take you for if you let that money slide out of your pocket!"

"It isn't in yet," Hanson reminded her.

"Wait until Beau's seen her; he would talk the devil on to his side," said Caroline with more confidence than she felt. "And I hope you'll remember," she added, with a strained coquettishness that made little impression on the man at her side, "that I've done my very best for you, and show me some nice little mark of appreciation when you've run your quarry to earth! If Beaufort's going to introduce me into the Carlton House circle, I must be able to compete with my lady of Devonshire and run my establishment in a style worthy of the important company I shall be entertaining."

"She's starting, you see!" William winked again and chuckled at his wife's impudence. "Ay, Brough, you won't have to complain of any of your old friends deserting you when you've got your hands on old Hercules Flood's fortune! Why, damme, man, they'll be elevating you to the War Office——!"

"Thank 'ee," was the grim rejoinder. "If it ever comes off, I'll be having no War Office; I've had enough of the army. I was talking with Peddy t'other day in Bristol and—what do you think of this?—he was advising me to take a quiet cut at the slave trade if there was any capital available."

"Gracious heavens! And him the president, or something of the kind, of the society for Abolition!" gaped Caroline.

"If you ask me, a dam' good notion." William's sidelong glance was slightly envious. "Your slave-trading connections ought to help you there."

"I an't got any slave-trading connections!" spluttered Hanson, outraged, as most gentlemen were in those days, at the accusation of dabbling in commerce. Such dabbling was carried on, indeed, on the sly; but through channels that concealed the illustrious names of the participants.

"Only your future wife," William was good enough to point out, as he rang for the candles to be lighted.

IV

"Ma chère, ouvres-moi la porte."

She had been tapping for so long and imploring an entrance that she was taken aback when the door opened widely. María Pía was there, smiling slightly, implacable reserve drawn like a veil across her strangely calm face. Madame Deschamps felt there was something ominous about such a calm. She cast an apprehensive look past the girl into the room, but all was, apparently, in its usual order. It was not until she entered and, following the direction of María Pía's eyes, glanced towards the uncurtained alcove, that she saw. . . .

"We will have that rubbish cleared away," María Pía was saying. "It does not matter—I shall not be sitting again. *Comment?*—evidently it was I who did it: a little cutting, a little breaking: it was not difficult—*hein?* "

Madame Deschamps gazed with horror upon the scene of destruction; her superior artistic perceptiveness shrank from the realization of what the ruin of his work and his materials would mean to Lionel. Curtly, with an economy of words rare to her, María Pía explained the situation; she might have been describing a scene in a play; the hardness of her tone and manner forbade sympathy. There was a little silence; the room had grown nearly dark.

"*Eh bien, ma chère,*" said Madame Deschamps at last. "And now—we go back to Cuba?" Her anger and resentment on the girl's behalf were shot through with a tremulous relief.

"We do what?" María Pía had planted her hands on her hips; her feet were apart—an attitude she had favoured when laying down the law as a little girl. "We go—as though we were defeated? *Qu'est-ce que tu veux, donc, Deschamps?* I remain!" She beat her clenched fist on the polished top of the cabinet near which she was standing.

"But how can you stay—here—where you have been so grossly insulted?" Madame Deschamps was nearly weeping.

"The next time it is I who do the insulting," was the grim rejoinder. "It is not this place which has insulted me. I will make something of it yet, you will see—if you stay with me," she added, shrugging her shoulders.

"It is not kind of you to say that! For the love of heaven be practical! How can we stay—what can you do—if we have no money? No word comes from your father; it is not to be supposed that he will sanction your remaining in England with none of your relatives here to support you."

"Listen; I have thought it all out, I will tell you. To begin with, I give this house—I make a gift of it, do you understand?—to the city of Bristol. I reserve apartments in it, of course, for myself, and for those who wait on me. The rest will be used as a hospital and aunt Pallas will be in charge of it. You and I will help her, which puts us in a position of authority."

"*Mon dieu* "—Madame Deschamps was wringing her hands—"you have no realism! How can you say these things—so like a child?"

María Pía swore deeply, as she had heard Santiago swear: Madame Deschamps looked at her in horror, for Spanish oaths have not the elegance of French, or the thundering reverberance of English ones: they are ugly,

obscene and eschewed absolutely in polite society. For a señorita to know such words—let alone to use them——! She came to the conclusion that the shock of the afternoon's encounter had turned María Pía's brain.

"I suppose I must be patient with you," said María Pía, not without humour. "Listen, Deschamps, *mon amie*: you must know that from my childhood I have not been like other girls. Had I been so, perhaps I should have been married, and settled down to gossip, and play cards, and eat *turrón* in Havana! I have wondered myself what it was that made me different, and now I think I have found out the reason. I am not a Spaniard, nor an African, nor an *inglesa*: but I am something of all three. And there is in me something which is much more man than woman. I like to fight; I like danger; and I love authority. I hope the sons that Leonor gives my father will be as good for Buonaventura as I should have been!"

She paused, laughed, and laid her ringed hand on her companion's shoulder.

"Let us get some wine; I am thirsty, and I think I can say a great deal more if I drink some wine!"

She said more: so much more that Madame Deschamps was nearly convinced. As they sat opposite each other in the candle-light, she felt the youth and urgency of the girl as she felt her own age; betraying—she hoped—nothing, she made an act in her own soul of resignation to the inevitable. There was no more question of María Pía's taking direction from her; authority had passed into the younger hands, and, even if it amounted to madness, she would have to obey. To what would it all lead? She could see no future save blackness, no solution—unless through Pallas Burmester. While María Pía talked, with an eagerness and vehemence that increased as the decanter of wine emptied, Madame Deschamps saw behind her own closed lids the calm face of "*la reine sans couronne*" (Lionel had informed them of his aunt's sobriquet in Bristol), and tried to devise her appeal.

She talked and talked until her throat was sore: and it seemed to her that each phrase she spoke was a clod thrown on the grave of her love for Lionel.

CHAPTER XIII

It was thanks to Miss Totty Shergill that Richard Peddy had made personal contact with a Liverpool gentleman named Hultmann. She and Peddy were bosom cronies: and the silly, empty-headed female of a quarter of a century ago had become a cunning, grasping old woman, with a preposterous memory for detail and a disregard of commercial ethics which often took Richard's breath away. The examination of Lawyer Shergill's private papers had revealed that the wily Tom's ventures in shipping had not been confined to Bristol firms. The Hultmann firm, now one of the largest and most successful in the northern port, had started in a very small way with a couple of ships which had secured the Company's charter in 1784, but which, for lack of capital, had been threatened with extinction three or four years later. The capital had been supplied by Tom, at a gratifying rate of interest, and various letters evidenced the appreciation of the head of the firm. It was actually Totty who suggested a meeting between Hultmann and Peddy, intimating with nods and winks the advantages, if they could be secured, of having a finger in the Liverpool pie.

"Ay, but I can't associate myself openly with Hultmann's," Richard pointed out to her. "You know yourself, Totty, the damage it 'ud do us here."

She sniggered, winked, and intimated that she had a better business head than Peddy's, which did not suit her listener. Even if the law were passed, she insisted, no Abolitionists were going to stop Hultmann and Long's West African trading; but more capital was needed, and it was worth while for Peddy's to offer it. The discussion had spread over months before Miss Totty gained her point in Mr. Hultmann's visit to Bristol.

Richard Peddy spread himself for the benefit of his Liverpool visitor. The term "Liverpool gentleman" had yet not come into existence, but reports were rife in the West Country of South Lancashire prosperity, and the scale on which the Liverpool shippers conducted their households. The house in Queen Square was embellished, its staff augmented, to impress the gentleman from the north. The only blot on the admirable scene prepared for the visitor was old Totty herself, who might have done better than appear in the old crumpled grenadine, stained on its pleated bosom with her careless eating and drops of the medicines which were her only form of self-indulgence. With her moth-eaten wig and grimy, wrinkled face, who would have thought this was the richest woman in Bristol? She could probably, if she chose, buy up Peddy's and Hultmann's together, thought Richard resentfully. But he professed to overlook Totty's shortcomings as he introduced Hultmann to the daughter of his one-time benefactor.

They dined after the Bristol fashion—that is to say, Bristol of the old days. Richard was no connoisseur of wines, but he had his father's cellar to draw upon, and old Hercules Flood had seen to that. "Ye an't got a palate, Peddy," the old man would chuckle, "but, by God, I'll see to it ye have one before I die!" He took it as a personal affront if his friends' cellars were not as well furnished as his own, and few important purchases of wines were made, in his

circle, without a consultation with the old epicure. Even when, in his latter years, he had burnt the lining of his stomach away with arquebus. Hercules could tell a vintage by its bouquet, and one of his bitterest laments in his old age was that he had destroyed his own palate with over-indulgence in spirits; he nevertheless retained to his dying day a respect for the man who had preserved that which, through his own follies, he had thrown away.

So Mr. Hultmann, a large, pale-faced, taciturn individual of Swedish extraction, was regaled with wines that could not have been bettered at Paragon; and the three of them ate their way stolidly through a meal which would have furnished ample provender for the week for the hungry families in Cyderhouse Lane. When at last the table was cleared, and the attendants had withdrawn, the conversation turned on a subject which, in Mr. Peddy's house, was never allowed to be broached before menials: the slave trade, its bygone glories, its future prospects.

His lips unsealed by wine, Mr. Hultmann was very optimistic about the future. He laid a short, impeccably tended finger against the side of a white, bulbous nose, and was delivered of a profound truth, which caused Miss Totty vigorously to nod her head, and Peddy to look uncomfortable, for he had the greatest possible objection to public discussion of matters involving moral issues, and it was his first meeting with Hultmann, who—not being as good a judge of character as his father—he did not know whether to trust or not. "There's no business that don't double its profits when the law's against it. What the trade's made for its servants in the past is nothing to what it's going to make when the Bill's gone through Parliament. I can tell you, sir, we Liverpool shippers have got the very greatest respect for the name of Peddy, and what it means to our future."

"Eh?" said Richard—startled, and showing it.

Hultmann wagged his head.

"There's only one Bristol name that carries an equal weight, sir; and that's the name of Burmester. Thanks to your admirable activities in this part of the world, I should not be surprised if we don't have Abolition inside of a year! You Bristol merchants have been farther-sighted than we are in Liverpool; you would hardly credit the amount of opposition the anti-traffic party has received in the north. Lancastrians pride themselves on their shrewdness; yet it astonishes me to see what a number look no farther than the end of their noses."

While Miss Totty continued to nod and snigger, and to show that she considered Mr. Hultmann a very knowing person indeed, Richard Peddy, at first alarmed, then dimly flattered, began to be fascinated by the totally new aspect of himself as presented by Hultmann. A singularly stupid fellow in many respects, he had espoused the cause of Abolition as many of his rivals had done—purely as a matter of expediency; the Machiavellian tactics ascribed to him by his guest had never entered his brain—nor, if they had done so, would it have seemed possible for him to profit by them. He had risen to civic importance on Abolition, and in a whispering gallery like Bristol there could be no side-traffic with the opposition. The nearest he had come to it had been trading rum to the Coast: a not unimportant aspect of slaving, profitable and discreet enough to escape notice with the Abolitionists.

Hultmann went on smoothly to outline the plans by which naval patrols

could be outwitted after the Act came in. "We have to build for speed," he impressed on his listeners, "economizing in deck and hold space by suitable disposition of the cargo. The French have got the idea already; we English lodge our cargo more extravagantly than any other of the trading nations." Peddy's objection, culled from recollections of his father's principles, that an ill-disposed cargo meant loss of profit to all concerned, was dismissed by Hultmann. "That's for the captains to deal with; a small increase of head money will put the skippers on their mettle, and I doubt whether we shall add more than two per cent to normal losses. The price of cargo will probably jump thirty per cent in the first year of the Act; it'll run to double before we've finished. The principal thing is to be sharp and get the harvest in before the storm breaks."

"And how's that to be done, with all the other countries undercutting us for price?"

"We've got our contracts, haven't we? And British colonies won't trade with foreigners—at least, not to start with." He ran off the names of some of the great British plantations, and ended by tapping fat fingers upon the fleshy palm of the other hand. "To be prepared, sir: that is the great thing. If we are ready, we can make more out of the slave trade in the first three years of Abolition than we've had out of a decade of recent traffic."

"And after? There's bound to be the slump."

"That, my dear sir, I think you can depend on it, need not concern us!" Hultmann smiled pale triumph over his hypnotized companion.

Richard began to mumble about discretion, and Hultmann agreed that the fewer who knew of the scheme the better. "Not that I imagine we're the first to have thought of it; but that doesn't mean there'll be much hanging together if the Government gets wind of us! Contrariwise, if we happen to be successful, and the others are not."

With a bob of the head between his thick shoulders, he began to apologize for boring the others with his conversation. "To tell you the truth, sir, and you, ma'am, slaving's my hobby, and I'm apt to forget others aren't so interested in it as I am myself," he said with simulated humility. Richard Peddy sat silent, grasping his knees, his eyes fixed in a vacant stare, as though he had not heard the other speaking. Hultmann went on to talk of other shipping matters, mainly in connection with his own company, and ended with the almost too casual admission that, although business was prospering, a little extra capital would not come amiss. It was very well done; the correlation of ideas perfect. If Richard Peddy cared to put up the capital, he could, if he pleased, take a share in the slaving gamble. An hour later, his hands shaking, the palms sweating, he had committed himself. If Bristol found out, he was a ruined man; like most conceited people, who regard themselves as better than their fellow-creatures and despise warnings, he had no idea that gossip was already germinating about his Liverpool dealings; that a clerk from the Hultmann office had, on his dismissal, found employment in Bristol, and that a totally false interpretation had been placed on his so far blameless correspondence with his Liverpool rival. Peddy prided himself on being too wise a man to give himself away on paper, and he might justifiably have demanded the public production of those letters on which the gossips were even then building their foundations

"La, Richard, you look green-sick!" Miss Totty was snickering—and he was, indeed, scared to death, but determined, now he had started, to see it through. He might, at this rate, make hundreds of thousands; a few well-considered gifts to the municipality, and the City knighthood which he coveted was within reach of his fingers. He stretched out his hand to the decanter and refilled his glass; as the ruby liquid flowed down his throat his nerves steadied themselves, a glow of confidence began slowly to spread itself throughout his system.

The company became very convivial; the gentlemen started to tell stories which, if it had been remotely possible to regard Miss Totty Shergill as a female, would have been out of place, but she grinned and picked at the hairs on her chin, and paid less attention to improprieties than to the fact that she was in with Hultmann and Peddy, up to the neck, and that there would be more gold to pay into Messrs. Elton, Lloyd, Knox, Walker and Hale; for the rest, she had had a great deal of brandy. None of the party paid much attention when the smart, authoritative rap of a footman's staff sounded on the fine entrance door. Peddy had given orders that he was not at home to callers on this particular evening, and his servants were well trained. He had no wish to flaunt this dinner-party to Hultmann, although the report of it would probably be all over Bristol in the morning; visits of shippers from the rival port were by no means uncommon, but the usual form of entertainment was a more or less public one—the Bristol merchants combining to fête their guests (if these were sufficiently important) in one of the good hosteleries that made a feature of catering for local hospitalities. It *might* look a little odd if one of his Abolition cronies dropped in and found him entertaining Hultmann on the sly: Bristol tongues were vicious—and inventive; he knew it would behave him to be more prudent than ever in his business associations.

To say that he was aghast when the door of the room was thrust open, to reveal Pallas Burmester, would be a woeful understatement. Yet there was nothing ominous or melodramatic about the style of her entrance; there was even a trace of modest confusion, such as might be experienced by any lady calling upon a single gentleman at an unusual hour of the night: there was at any rate nothing to convey the fact that Miss Burmester had just succeeded in paralysing the servants who opened the door: in forbidding them to announce her, and in walking across Richard Peddy's marble-tiled hall as though it and all it contained were her own private possessions.

Richard Peddy scrambled to his feet; Totty's jaw dropped and she wiped her chin with the back of her hand, to ejaculate: "La, Pally Burmester!" Mr. Hultmann rose, bowing formally: his ear had caught the name, his brain registered it, and he suppressed a chuckle at the thought that this was an awkward moment for his friend Peddy.

"I must ask your pardon, Mr. Peddy," Pallas was saying with a calmness that paralysed her host, "for intruding on you at so informal an hour; my excuse is that two such busy people must of necessity ignore convention when our business requires it."

Peddy, stuttering, introduced Hultmann, who bowed for the second time.

"It gives me the greatest pleasure in the world to meet Miss Burmester. You, ma'am, and I are in opposite camps; but that's no reason why we should not meet friendly on neutral ground."

"I know nothing about your camp, Mr. Hultmann," she said briskly, evading with a curtesy his proffered hand, "but I'll have to beg your indulgence in this interruption of your conversation with Mr. Peddy. Well, Totty, how are you? It seems a long time since we met—our paths don't seem to lie the same way at all, these days." Her eyes twinkled, for she knew Totty had taken pains to evade her since Pallas had tried to get a large subscription out of her for the Society. There was flattery in the evasion, for no one save Pallas had succeeded in frightening Totty about her money. So formidable was Pallas known to be, when "on the warpath" on behalf of her beloved Society, that Lord Mildenhall had promised his sister-in-law to double whatever sum she succeeded in getting out of Miss Totty Shergill; but so far he had not been called upon to redeem his promise. Pallas was not, however, in a mood to tackle Totty to-night.

She sat down in the chair Peddy reluctantly offered her, and then, and only then, an impartial observer might have remarked that this beautiful old woman looked every year of her age. Without preamble, she told Peddy why she had come. He, having had time to recover his composure, at first pooh-poohed her suggestion.

"Now, ma'am—now, now! You don't tell me that a person of your intelligence has been allowing herself to be led astray by vulgar gossip?" he began, on a note of superiority which a more perceptive individual would have felt to be dangerous.

"I seek only to assure myself that the matter is gossip," she answered, setting a control on herself which was visible in her tightened lips and downcast eyes.

"My dear ma'am, you can take it for granted that the Governor . . ."

"That the Governor—what? I'm disposed to take nothing for granted that goes on in St. Peter's Hospital, sir! Has this person had access to the Governor? Has he had opportunity to state his case for himself?"

"Mistress Burmester"—Mr. Peddy showed his conviction that he had a right to be exasperated—"you yourself had opportunity to inspect the person of whom we are speaking. I put it to you, ma'am, was he in a fit condition to state a case?"

"He was asleep," pointed out Pallas. "I have also received credible information that, since he was removed from that—cess-pit, his condition is somewhat improved."

"Indeed? And who is your credible informant, may I ask?" sneered Peddy.

"Names are neither here nor there. I know that the man has on several occasions made application to see the Governor, and each time has been refused."

"No doubt with good reason. If notice were to be taken of every complaint started by the imbeciles, St. Peter's would be Bedlam!" blustered Peddy. "Such matters lie at the Governor's discretion; we as members of the Board have no grounds of interference. You yourself, ma'am, helped to vote him into his appointment; we——"

"I did not. When the Governor was appointed I was having smallpox."

"You will at least," said Peddy unpleasantly, "not suggest that your fellow Board-members are incapable, in your absence, of handling the affairs of the hospital?"

"Oh, no; I'll suggest, however, that a cousinship has, not for the first time, been allowed to outweigh other qualifications in securing a well-paid post," said Pallas, equally unpleasantly. "Come, sir, we are getting away from our subject: which is, briefly, that I am not alone in wishing for an inquiry into the affairs of the so-called Devil-Man."

"Since when did Miss Burmester act as mouthpiece for the rabble?"

"I should not, if I were you, go too far, Richard Peddy," said Pallas, after a pause. "You can't talk to me, you know, as if I were Nathaniel Bowling." "That insubordinate scoundrel!"

"Oh, keep your temper, Richard! He is nothing of the sort. Now, tell me: what is your objection to looking into this matter?"

"I have told you," mouthed Peddy, now almost beside himself with rage, "it is none of my business. I don't keep a dog and bark myself; when I appoint a responsible person, I see that he is capable of performing the duties required of him, and leave him to do it. Interference, ma'am, is not the way to run a public concern!—or a private one, if it comes to that."

Miss Totty, who had been listening with open mouth to this exchange of hostilities, here remarked:

"La, Pally, what's all the fuss about? The fellow an't a nigger, is he?" She and Hultmann exchanged glances, and the lady giggled.

"This concerns you, Totty, as much as it concerns me," was the surprising answer. "You're a trustee, aren't you, for the fund for survivors of the *Cassiopeia*?"

"The *Cassiopeia*——?" Miss Totty's jaw dropped. Richard Peddy took the words out of her mouth.

"Now, hark 'ee, ma'am—survivors of the *Cassiopeia*——! They're a myth—an' you know it! For the last twenty years we've had scum turning up in this and other ports, claiming to be survivors of the *Cassiopeia*. That fund your father and Tom Shergill started smells from here to Timbuctoo, and fetches all the rabble across the high seas. Time and money have been spent in sifting their claims, which have in all cases, save that of the man Bowling, proved to be false. On Bowling's own testimony—you can view his deposition any time you like at the Merchant 'Venturers'——"

"I have done so."

"—there can be *no* survivors. I therefore uphold the authorities," he concluded pompously, "in refusing any further investigations. In my opinion the Governor has acted rightly in ignoring attempts on the part of foolish busybodies to start this *Cassiopeia* twaddle over again."

"You forget, perhaps," said Pallas—her lips had gone very dry and she ran her tongue over them to moisten them; her face was grey like steel. "You forget, perhaps, that I have a particular interest in the fate of the *Cassiopeia*."

"Goodness me, Pally!" squeaked Miss Totty.

"As part administrator of the fund, I demand an investigation into this particular case, and I suggest that no time shall be lost in getting on with it."

Richard Peddy shrugged his shoulders.

"In that case, you'd better see the Governor."

"That is exactly what I propose to do; and you are coming with me."

"Eh?"

"You won't," said Pallas with grim humour, "leave an unattended female to proceed through an admittedly rough part of the town——?"

"What, you mean now?" gasped Peddy. "At this hour of the night? Come, ma'am, you must be crazy! The officers of St. Peter's will long have gone to bed."

"Then they can be roused."

"To what purpose? To consider the case of a pauper lunatic? No, no, this is an absurdity!" He laughed shortly, reaching again towards the decanter, from which he filled his own glass and Hultmann's, looking at the latter with an air of apology. "Calm yourself, ma'am"—his tone was once again insultingly superior. "I suppose we must, if you insist, look into this matter; but since it has waited so long, a night can make no difference."

"If you had been kept in an abominable durance for what to you seemed like eternity, would you say a night made no difference?" she retorted. "I'd never a high opinion of your imagination, Richard Peddy! I think no more of it now. Come; for my horses have been standing long enough. You can, if you will, bring your friends with you."

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" cried Peddy petulantly. "I—make myself a laughing-stock for the whole of Bristol—knocking up the hospital at this hour of the night? You may do as you please, ma'am; my duties as a host detain me here." His little eyes glared defiance at her across the room.

"Nay, pray don't consider me, sir," put in Hultmann, intrigued and mystified at the same time by a conversation whose purport he was not quite able to grasp and whose phrases evidently covered a strong feeling between the protagonists. "As I have an early start in the morning, I'd begun to think of retiring before the lady's arrival."

"No, no," said Peddy angrily. "Sit you down, sir, and we'll have up another bottle—and perhaps Miss Burmester will join us, as I can't believe . . ."

"Never mind what you believe," said Pallas quietly. "I'll give you your last chance, Richard Peddy. Good God," she said, still very quietly, "you don't think I came here just to tell you I am going to St. Peter's—or to waste time in arguments? Without your authority, as you very well know, even I can't gain admission to the hospital at this hour; so you're coming——"

"I am not."

"Yes, you are; and do you know why? If you don't, several people will know, to-morrow morning, the company you've been entertaining. They will know"—she drew a deep breath—"about your dealings with the Liverpool slave traders——"

Watching him narrowly, she knew that her arrow, shot at a venture, had found its mark; she herself could hardly believe it—that this man, who had used Abolition as a stepping-stone to public advancement, was indeed guilty of the duplicity she had heard ascribed to him. If, however, she had still doubted, she would have received confirmation from a certain queer look which passed like a flash across Hultmann's face, and by the turkey-cock crimson of Peddy's. Totty Shergill was clicking her tongue against her gums . . . Pallas felt the stitch in her side which came whenever she suffered any sort of mental or emotional shock, and steadied herself quickly. It was no moment, now, to go into questions of ethics; let her use the advantage she

had temporarily gained to further her main object. She believed—she dared not think what she believed; knowing what Bristol folk were for gossip, her common sense, all the practical side of her nature, had striven to the last moment against the acceptance of Nathaniel Bowling's statement; even now, she told herself, she only accepted it reservedly. But while so much as a glimmer of possibility existed, no time must be lost in examining it: no foolish formula of procedure must delay the discovery of—if it might be—the truth.

So it was thus that Miss Pallas Burmester's coach arrived outside St. Peter's Hospital; that Mr. Richard Peddy was driven reluctantly to demand entrance; that the gates were opened, and the coach rolled through—into apparent pandemonium: for those of the patients who could walk had rushed shouting into the open. A light sprang up in the Governor's house; the door opened, and that functionary appeared, dragging his breeches over his night-shirt, dazed, not a little scared, and finally confounded by the presence of his Chairman and—great God in heaven!—that menace to an honest man's peace and quiet, Miss Pallas Burmester! There was red ruin in this visitation; had the place gone mad? Where were the night attendants whose duty it was to preserve the sleep of their superiors? What was that incessant thud, thud, thud, as though someone were trying to break down a door? He pulled himself together, shivering, and tried to answer the Chairman's questions.

"What the devil's going on here, sir?" Peddy was roaring.

Pallas, descended from the coach, was trying to set aside the figures which, apparently crazed with fear, swarmed upon her.

"He's a-gettin' loose! We'll all be tore in pieces!"

"This is the individual whose case you have come to investigate, ma'am!" Peddy was yelling maliciously in her ear. "He is the one responsible for this bedlam! A fine subject for investigations——!"

She ignored him, closing her eyes for a moment upon the infernal scene, then moved towards a door out of which were still stumbling the occupants of the men's wards—some of them half naked, some clutching their bedding about their shoulders, all apparently in dread of their lives. From the women's windows voices were shrieking Fire, Murder and Thieves. Peddy, angrily pushing his way at her side, launched another sneer:

"This is your doing, ma'am—I hope you recognize it and I hope you're satisfied! This is what comes of taking the lunatics from their proper quarters and setting them where they can endanger the lives of their fellow-creatures!" He cried nervously to the Governor, who, shaking from head to foot and speechless with apprehension, followed them: "Can the fellow break out? Is there no one to protect us?" China Ben had by now found it expedient to disappear; bolting through the gates as they opened, he was lost in the gathering mob which yowled and hammered in the street.

Pallas paid no attention; she might have been a somnambulist as she went slowly up the dim stairs, led by the lantern which flickered against the upper wall to the almost emptied wards, from which came a pitiful wailing and moaning from the panic-stricken few whose companions had left them, they believed, to the frenzy of the lunatic. She came into the long, low-ceilinged room, with its rows of pallets and stench of sickness and uncleanness and its pitifully inadequate provision for the sufferers; and at first she could hardly see, for there was only one light to the whole apartment. Then, across the pallet

nearest to her, she made out a figure, lying prone and motionless; and instinct told her he was dead. The shock of fear had stopped his heart. Was it true she was responsible for that?

There was weakness in her limbs as she went between the empty and dishevelled pallets, and came at last to one by which she paused; it was, in fact, as though a hand stretched out and checked her. She had forgotten about J. R. Bowling; but the blue eyes that strained to her from the unshaven thicket of beard revived her memory. She stood still; she stretched out her hand and said on a note of uncertainty: "Bowling?"

He could make no reply, but she felt him crying to her with all the agony of the voiceless; she went and crouched so low beside him that she was almost sitting on the pallet, the folds of her gown dabbled in the filth of the floor. She laid her hand over the gnarled, helpless fist of a sailor, its blue anchors and serpents staring from the pitifully whitened flesh.

"Bowling. Can you hear me? Help me, will you?"

A shapeless sound came from the hidden lips.

"It's not safe here," Peddy was snapping. "Hark you to that—the door'll be down in a minute! Send for the guard! And you, ma'am—will you come, or must I make you?" The words ended in a shriek, for there was the unmistakable sound of splintering wood and of a door that crashed outwards against a wall. Then there was silence, broken only by the terrified whimpers of the bedridden.

A door at the farther end of the room opened uncertainly, upon darkness, sending the two men scampering in the opposite direction. Crouched on the pallet, Pallas waited, her hypnotized eyes fixed upon the patch of blackness beyond the opened door.

The immense figure which entered, slowly, doubtfully, as though uncertain of its welcome, more than filled the space between lintel and floor; lowering its head a little, it stepped carefully through, clutching the sacking which was caught about its middle with loops of rope. Its aspect, indeed, was terrifying, and froze the beholders to silence, but its movements were gentle enough; it trod as though unsure of that which lay under its feet, still lowering its head and its brows; puzzled, it peered through the hairy growth that covered its features; the enormous framework of its shoulders stared through a thin web of discoloured flesh, and the knee and elbow joints were like swellings on the branches of an old tree.

It stood there doubtfully, unaware of the terror it was spreading, shivering a little, though unconsciously, and with ribs still heaving from the effort it had made to escape from its prison. It had forgotten, by now, its own motive for escape; it wavered, as though contemplating return. A harsh, whistling breath came from one of the pallets: a man dying from inflammation of the lungs. The noise seemed to make it uneasy. . . .

Now a figure was advancing towards it down the room, tall, implacable, threatening, with a chain, or perhaps a rope, in its hands. The fugitive fell into an instinctive attitude of self-defence—half crouching, with an arm a-swing. There was a sharp, angry cry in a woman's voice:

"What are you doing? Let him alone! It's all right—it's all right, Matthew! Here is Bowling——"

Bowling? . . . Bowling? . . . Another name. Camels. A desert. Pain,

fever, thirst—and a hand that held water to his lips. Bowling! His eyes roved dimly, seeking to penetrate what seemed like the layers of light. A woman, on a bed, supporting a man—whose mouth hung wide open, and worked, and emitted strange noises, as though he strove to utter; whose eyes, starting, and ringed round with bloodshot white, were the same faded bright blue that had looked into his own in the desert. And as Matthew hesitated, the noises managed to shape themselves into one word—"Flood! Flood!"—though some might not have recognized it. He felt a sharp pain in his head, something shifted in his brain, he pitched forward, and his arms were about the man and the woman, clutching human flesh—"Bowling!"

"Is that good enough for you, Mr. Chairman?" Pallas was asking faintly as they assisted her to rise.

CHAPTER XIV

I

"If you will neither come out nor admit me, I shall remain here all night."

"I cannot help it, can I, if you are a madman?"

"I'm not mad, although I was—for a little while—this morning."

"I know nothing about this morning." She shrugged her shoulders; they were both speaking in lowered voices, he from the moonlit drive, she from her bedroom window. She wondered indifferently how long it would be before Madame Deschamps awakened, to interrupt this idyll: but her heart was throbbing against her folded arms, she felt a bitter triumph over Paragon and all its inhabitants, in Lionel's return.

"María Pía, come down to me. I can't talk to you from here."

She shook her head.

"You have very odd ideas; perhaps they are part of your idea of me. . . ." She allowed her voice to trail away; the words made a faint, cold echo, which lingered on the air.

"Do you wish me to break in?"

"On the contrary; and you would regret it very much, if you did." She gave a short laugh.

"You had better not threaten!" came the warning answer. The very fact of her replying to him, he was thinking, was an encouragement; whatever might be her resentment, she did not loathe him. His own heart had leapt at the pale, astonished sight of her face, when she heard his footsteps on the gravel. He had had the feeling he might never see her again; he was prepared to search for her the world over, to prostrate himself before her and to beg her forgiveness of the unpardonable scene of the morning. He did not know how white and touching his own face was, with the scar upon it, when he lifted it to her window. If it had not been for that scar, she told herself, she would not have suffered him. But it was her own hand which had laid that blemish upon an almost perfect beauty, and there was a thrill of guilt in the cold response she made to his pleading.

Twice she had tested him, by drawing back from the window and lowering her curtains; but each time, when curiosity drove her back—she watched the clock: ten minutes—twenty minutes—he was still there: standing on the drive (he had left his horse tethered close to the stables), with his hands clasped behind his back, one knee advanced, his weight on the other leg, as though he were quite prepared to spend the night there. It seemed as though he had never moved between her two glances. At last she was driven to fling open the window: to call down to him with assumed exasperation:

"If that is the English fashion of serenading a lady, I think it is a very dull one!"

"I am not intending to serenade you," said Lionel calmly. "I am only trying to give you proof of something which you do not seem inclined to believe."

"And what is that?"

"If my 'idea of you,' as you call it, were that conveyed by my words this morning, do you think I should be here now?"

"You keep talking about this morning: what is it? My memory does not extend so far," was the freezing response.

He raised his hand and touched his cheek.

"Perhaps your memory extends as far as—this?"

She gasped.

"I'm surprised you should refer to it. In my country a man does not boast of that sort of thing!"

"Am I boasting? I did not mean to. It is very sore."

"I am glad!" she told him, through her clenched teeth.

"And so am I," he answered simply. "In your place I should have done the same." As she was silent, he added: "Will you not come down and let me make my peace with you?"

She did not know how she came to be upon the stair, or what made her step so light as she achieved the descent in the dark. Her hair was loose, tied back in a ribbon on the nape of her neck, and the thick folds of a chamber-gown clothed her more completely than most women clothed themselves in the fashions of that day: without knowing, there was a kind of grandeur about her. But it was not of grandeur she thought: the only cogent thought in her mind was that, at the end of a day filled with every sort of painful and humiliating experience, love waited for her, in Lionel's arms; sore, bitter and exhausted as she was, there yet remained this; and, for the moment, she would not look beyond.

So they stood, breast to breast, within the shadow of Triton walls, and all the night was sweet and scented about them; and she, who in that moment of infinite relaxation was ready to give everything, was touched by the tender reverence of Lionel's embrace. They were both trembling very much, and he, with his head buried in her bosom, was incoherent with his love, his gratitude and his relief. Each felt, in a different way, a sense of passing from nightmare into dream; each dreaded to break the spell by an intrusion of realities, of material facts, which, as each knew, must sooner or later be faced and dealt with. What a strange, quiet, delicate little thing was love!—so different from the torrent she had pictured it; like dew on the hair, like the soft, enveloping breeze of English night—her realism told her it could not always be thus, nor could the tropical element in her have been satisfied with it for ever; but there was something mystical and curious about it which, for the time, was enough. She knew Lionel was very happy.

"Shall we always be together, love?"

"Why do you talk about always?" she murmured, with her hand lifting and sinking into the deep softness of his hair. "Let us just think about *now*——"

"I daren't think about now," he told her. "Don't you know this is a dream, and we may wake up at any minute? I've got to be sure of you when I awaken——"

"And what is sureness?" she asked, with a sad irony.

"You will marry me, María Pía?"

Her lips were parted to say "Yes," when Caroline's poisonous words came back to her: "You did not think seriously you could marry a Sax?" This

would indeed be vengeance!—yet, holding Lionel in her arms, she knew she could not make him an implement of vengeance. What, exactly, had Caroline meant? What were these Saxons, that a de Lorch was not good enough for them? What English blood, she wondered, could match with her own proud African inheritance, on which a vulgar and ill-bred woman had dared to pour scorn? He felt her stiffen, and his arms tightened.

“Let us talk of those things to-morrow,” she evaded him. “Forgive me, *querido mio*, that I want to stay in my dream a little longer! You see, I have never had time for dreaming; even in Cuba we didn’t dream—no, indeed, there was always so much to do.”

“You shall do nothing but dream when we are married,” he promised her.

“Marriage is not a dream,” she frowned.

“We can make it one,” he insisted. Suddenly confidence burst from him like a fountain; she felt herself tossed on its surface as he drew her lips towards his.

II

The guard stood helpless before the hordes that flooded the streets, that poured down like ants towards the Old Mint; the darkness boiled with noises, many were trampled and a few killed in the stampede, and half the folk did not know what it was all about, for those who could have told them were driven back by the pressure of the hordes who drove towards the centre of excitement. By the time a message reached the barracks, and the military turned out, St. Peter’s was in a state of siege; the most prevalent rumour was that the Man-Devil of Corsica had broken loose and slaughtered half the inmates; inside the yard was a shambles—on the authority of those who, apparently, could see through wood and stone. Those who had friends or relatives inside screamed for news of their belongings; a party of back-street ruffians armed themselves with staves and pieces of old iron snatched from the dockyards and hacked their way through the crowds, taking, as usual, any pretext for violence. Reduced by its hardships, Bristol had not, for years, enjoyed such a classic brawl; it seemed bent on proving that the old spirit was not dead. Deserted houses were skilfully looted by gangs who had given up hope of reaping such a harvest, and the noise spread rapidly into the refined regions of Queen Square and across the arm of the Frome to College and Lower Greens; in the Wardells’ little house in Trenchard Lane, Clara Wardell thumped and shouted her reluctant husband into getting up and lighting the candles; Flora anxiously drew back the curtains and was glad Miss Burmester lived so far out of the town. Old Totty Shergill, who had summoned her shabby coach and driven home on her host’s departure, slapped her little maidservant for wanting to go and find out what it was all about, and Mr. Hultmann, freeing an ear from his pillows and nightcap, reflected that Bristol was living up to its reputation as one of the most lawless cities in the kingdom.

The shaly roofs were rosy with the dawn by the time the soldiers had cleared the streets, which were empty, save for the debris of battle, and a few scared-looking cats, when a coach drove slowly out of Purgatory yard. It held two occupants: one, half on the floor, half supported by the deep, padded seat

facing the horses, was wrapped about in blankets, and knew nothing of his surroundings; the other was the ghost of Pallas Burmester, taking her lost love home.

III

It was not long before the scandal of St. Peter's reached Paragon. Beaufort, riding into Bristol on the morning after these occurrences, was the first to hear it. So far had he hypnotized himself that it did not occur to him for a moment that he would not be able to put straight Caroline's muddle. If it was a muddle? He was not sure whether, by rousing María Pía's anger to the extent she had described, she had not done him a service. His lady had had the night in which to think it over, and must surely have come to the conclusion that this was the only way out of a difficult situation. He was not prepared for the shock which met him, long before he reached Triton—for Bristol was agog with the return of the lost one, and he heard many versions of the story before he set his horse towards the hill.

He knew at once that he had delayed overlong. A young lady isolated from her family and at the mercy of a foreign tongue was one thing; the granddaughter of Matthew Flood, *redivivus*, another. And in reflecting upon these things, the ice congealed about Beaufort's character melted, suddenly, into an overwhelming torrent: so that he was prepared, for a moment, at any price to gain her. An even more unpleasant surprise was his before the close of day, for William, who had kept his word to Lionel, who had begged him to ride over in the course of the afternoon with news of his mother, sought him out with a face as long as a fiddle.

Beaufort was in no sweet mood, for the señorita de Lorcha had refused to receive him; nor had Madame Deschamps taken the trouble to descend, and explain her charge's delinquency. His sense of possessiveness had received a shock. He snapped at William, when the latter buttonholed him after supper, and asked what the devil was the matter.

"I an't sure," admitted William, and mumbled that Hanson had accompanied him to Bristol.

"I told him to keep away until I had seen her!"

"Oh, we didn't go near Triton. It's a fine to-do, an't it, about old Flood's coming back?"

"What are you hiding?"

"I an't sure, Beau," William repeated in his muddle-headed fashion. "You know we went to Lionel's."

"Why?"

"Mama, of course; she wanted news of him, and he of her—and after the mysterious row of yesterday the one an't speaking to the other! But I think I've found out what the row was about."

"And what may that be?" He purposely opposed the formality of his style to William's slovenly diction.

"Lionel's after your nigger. Nay, Beau, don't lose you head"—as the other's face became, first livid, then suffused with a leaden purple. "It's only a guess, but you'll admit we've got some grounds to guess on."

"Lionel was out when we got to his lodgings, but the woman that looks after 'em let us up. We'd half an hour there before Lionel came in—with not much of a welcome for either, I may tell you. We made no comments, but it was deuced awkward——"

"What was awkward, you fool?"

"The whole room—plastered from end to end with pictures of Miss de Lorcha; there must have been a hundred of 'em—no doubt what Lionel's got on his mind. So there you are; don't say I didn't warn you. But it looks to me as if Hanson had better be looking elsewhere for the heiress that's got to save him from ruin, and if I were you, Beau, I'd have a pretty sharp understanding with Lionel." As Beaufort made no reply, he continued: "It explains the state Mama's in, doesn't it? She says, by the way, she's going to Bristol to-morrow, to see aunt Pallas."

"Does the doctor say she is fit to travel?"

"It won't matter what the doctor says, will it, if Mama's mind's made up? I say, Beau . . ."

"Well?"

"I was just thinking: if Lionel's been talking to Mama, it don't sound as if this was just an ordinary affair."

"If you would employ the vocabulary of a civilized being, instead of a clown," said Beaufort viciously, "one might be able to understand you."

"Oh, you diplomatists can monopolize the vocabulary; I'm a soldier," said William easily, "and I don't find any difficulty in making the men understand me. If I spun out the yarn like you do, they wouldn't know what I was talking about. But, putting one thing with another, it looks as if Lionel's up to something more serious than a romance. Hanson's in a panic, and says if you can't bring matters to a head in a day or two, he's off to Bath—where Miss Mannerling's arrived, from staying with the Melbournes. He says that anyhow, this old grandfather turning up may make a deuce of a difference."

Beau was devilishly disturbed, was his latest account to Hanson, and went out of the room as though he meant to murder somebody. To do him justice, it was not solely of his *amour* that he was thinking: he had received, by the afternoon's post, an urgent summons to London, to disregard which would be extremely prejudicial to his immediate prospects. He knew he must go—and his crystal palace of self-delusion was in smithereens.

In her boudoir, with her head enveloped in clouds of gauze to conceal its dishevelment, a semi-*maquillage* sketchily disposed about features piteously disordered by a sleepless night, Lady Mildenhall moaned to her husband.

"I hated him from the moment he ruined Pally's life; to think he should inflict such misery upon us!"

"My love, you cannot blame Matthew Flood for our Lionel's sentiments."

"That they should be centred on such an object! I'd rather have seen him dead—or killed the creature with my own hands!"

"Orry, my darling, you are not yourself. It is not the fault of this poor young woman—neither her unhappy heredity nor Lionel's falling in love with her. She must have some peculiar quality, since it proves so attractive to both our sons."

"Beaufort! You can trust Beaufort to look after himself," she said bitterly.

"She is probably already his mistress—oh, don't you see how horrible it

all is? Lionel, so delicate, so sensitive, so full of ideals and romance—the prey of a vile, licentious creature whose mother worked on the plantations——!”

“No, no, my dearest; you know that Miss de Lorcha’s ancestors were never slaves.”

“What difference does it make?” There was no reason left in Orabella; she was surrendered wholly to her rage and her grief. “I shall go and see Pally; bitter as it is to me, to call upon the services of one who has played traitor to me—as I never realized my own sister capable of doing—I’ll even humble myself to that!”

Lord Mildenhall thought that it was a poor moment for approaching Pallas, but did not attempt to lay any difficulties in his wife’s way.

Beaufort, meanwhile, was making his preparations for the return to London. What did the summons portend? It might be a visit to The Hague, to Germany, or back to Spain. It meant, at any rate, the temporary abandonment of his designs on María Pía. He sent for Hanson, and had a long, urgent conversation on the necessity for Hanson’s prosecuting his suit with the utmost vigour; a course which the wily captain seemed singularly loth to follow.

“Supposin’ the girl an’t got the money after all, Beau? I’m left in a precious queer position. I don’t gain anything by saddlin’ myself with a wife, solely for your benefit.”

Beaufort bit his lip. He was aware of it. He was also, and more keenly, aware of the impossibility, now, of persuading María Pía to abandon the conventions and accompany him, his declared mistress, back to town, and, thereafter, whithersoever fortune might take him. A wild scheme of kidnapping flashed through his brain—only to be dismissed; such a course, even if it were successful, might spell disaster to his diplomatic reputation. She must come, if she came at all, of her own free will; if Hanson defaulted, or if she were obdurate in the matter of marriage, other means of persuasion must be found. Meanwhile, and in the short time that remained before his departure, the matter of Lionel must be dealt with. For once, William was not a fool; Lionel—he recognized it as though the whole scene were lit up with blue fire—was the real danger. His romantic appearance, attitudes, occupation, furnished a danger which, Beaufort now realized, he had been wrong previously to underestimate. Was the girl equally *éprise*?

For the second time, Beaufort rode back to Bristol. It was not difficult to find Lionel; he sprang to his feet as his brother, unannounced, opened the door; he made no attempt to conceal that on which he was working—a charcoal *croquis* of a female figure on horseback: most obviously María Pía.

“Beau! Is Mama worse——?”

Beaufort’s lowered eyelids, the faint smile flickering on his lips, dismissed this futility. Tall, narrow, lowering, followed by his shadow, he crossed the candle-lit studio and raised his glass to look at Lionel’s easel.

“You are making progress,” he condescended to observe.

“I’m glad you think so, Beau. But you have not answered my question about Mama.”

“I am surprised you are so solicitous about Mama,” stabbed Beaufort, “who, it appears, are responsible for her condition.”

“That,” said Lionel, “is a matter which concerns her and myself only. I

should be obliged if you would refrain from commenting upon affairs of which you know nothing." He paused, making an evident effort of self-control. "Is she better?"

"I have not seen her since the morning, but as I hear she is out of bed, it seems she has recovered. I have as little desire," he continued smoothly, "to pry into your affairs as you, I hope, have to interfere with mine."

"How should your affairs concern me, Beau?"

"How indeed?" The speaker resumed his cold scrutiny of the drawing. "Well, it seems you were right in your insistence upon art as a career. There is something more than talent in the manner of handling that torso; there is life in the line you employ, and an admirable understanding of anatomy. You have worked hard."

Listening to this schoolmasterly eulogy of his efforts, Lionel's jaw dropped; Beaufort's pretensions as critic of art had always amused him, and, at the same time, forced him to admit that they were not wholly unjustified. He had picked out unerringly the best in the *croquis*, and if he had decided to ignore its subject, so much the better.

"I think you are wasting your time, here in Bristol," was Beaufort's next pronouncement.

"That's a matter of opinion. I've got a lot to learn, yet, from little Bird," said Lionel modestly.

"It is a mistake to underestimate one's powers." Beaufort shook his head.

"Bird is, no doubt, a useful hack——"

"Egad, he's a Royal Academician!"

"A qualification not too difficult to come by!" The speaker gave his pinched smile. "If he amounted to anything serious, one may be sure he would not remain in Bristol, out of touch with artistic society, with modern ideas of progress—which in art are of no less importance than they are in, shall we say, politics?"

"I don't think you do Bird justice, Beau," said Lionel earnestly. "He is a most excellent fellow, with a thorough knowledge of all the groundwork of painting, and his patience as a teacher is astounding. I could never bring myself to take so much trouble with some of the scribbles done by the fellows—who've only joined the school as a means of escaping from more strenuous occupations!—a fact which little Bird perfectly realizes: yet he goes on struggling as patiently and kindly with them as though they were budding Lawrences!"

"One might see more virtue in that if his patience were unremunerative!" sneered Beaufort.

"Damnation, Beau, the man must earn his living! It is a mark of his honesty that he takes so much pains over these charlatans—who would be equally satisfied if he were to sit and swill beer, instead of poring over their wretched canvases; I am sure the miserable fees he charges are poor compensation for all the time and conscience he puts into his lessons," was the indignant rejoinder. Beaufort inclined his head with mock acquiescence.

"You, of course, must be the superior judge on that point. I still incline to the opinion that you have reached the stage when you should be under a modern master, with a name that lends prestige to the work of his pupils."

"Well, you know that Papa has promised, later on, to introduce me to

Lawrence." Lionel spoke uneasily: he found something behind Beaufort's unusual interest in his career.

"I think I can do better for you."

"*You, Beau?*" The emphasis on the pronoun was unflattering, he realized it, and smiled a quick apology; for, of course, Beaufort had his finger in every sort of pie; he was a *habitué* of the fashionable bohemian world that linked the far-apart spheres of aristocratic and artistic society, a world in which duchesses hobnobbed with stars of the theatre, and each fawned upon the famous portraitists who could render their charms immortal.

"I doubt whether, even with Papa's influence behind you, Lawrence would be willing, at once, to take you as a pupil." The great masters, he went on to say, were not enamoured of the work of the provincial academies, when it was brought to their notice. Bad habits, technical mannerisms were encouraged—Beaufort illustrated his point with a surprising accuracy, from Lionel's drawing—which it took years to eradicate, when once imbibed by the pupil as an essential part of his method. Lionel must not risk infection with these faults, which, conscientious as the Bristol master might be, he was obviously communicating to his pupils.

Outwardly courteous, Lionel was inwardly raging at Beaufort's assumptions of omniscience on a subject of which he could have only a superficial knowledge; he advanced a few modest arguments, though, short of saying that he was a better judge than Beaufort of Bird's achievements, both as painter and teacher, he could say nothing very convincing. Beaufort suddenly spoke a name at which all his senses sprang to attention.

"As you know, he was a favourite pupil of Reynolds, and it's a common *on dit* that the master deputed some of his less exigent commissions to his ex-apprentice! Mrs. Oregon's portrait, for example, of which she makes such boast, saying that her husband paid two thousand guineas to have her painted by Reynolds, is said, by the sapient, not to have more than a dozen brush-marks of Reynolds upon it. I was in White's, when someone offered a bet that Palgrave, in forty-eight hours, would produce an undetectable 'Reynolds'!"

Lionel was holding his breath; he knew it was true—that short of the master, he could have no better teacher than the one of whom Beaufort spoke. He temporized.

"But surely—it would be no more difficult for me to get with Lawrence than with Palgrave! They say his classes are crowded out, that there is a long waiting-list——"

"Palgrave is obliged to me for two commissions; I have no doubt that, if you will accompany me to London, I can get you into his atelier."

Lionel stood very still, his hands clenched tight in the pockets of his breeches—which were smeared with charcoal. He knew that this was the most important chance that had ever come in his way as an artist, and that it might prove the turning-point of his whole career. And he knew that it meant leaving Maria Pia, who, for all her declared love for him, had not yet given him her promise to marry him. He remained sunk in thought for several moments—and recovered, to find Beaufort's eyes watching him like a snake's. He was shocked to find how deep were his suspicions of his brother.

"Why are you taking so deep an interest in my work, Beau?"

"You can hardly say it is a new development" Beaufort shrugged his shoulders. "You may recall that I was your first customer: that small landscape for which I gave you a guinea has accompanied me on most of my travels."

"Then why," said Lionel, even more quietly, "are you so anxious to get me out of Bristol?"

"Take care," said Beaufort. It was almost a whisper.

"It's no good, Beau." Lionel leaned forward, removed, as though absently, the drawing from the easel, tore it carefully in half and put the two pieces on the fire. He turned fully towards his brother. "You see, I know what you're after."

Beaufort walked very quietly across the room, to stand on the hearth beside Lionel; without looking at him, he spread out his hands to the blaze. It might have been the most amicable of discussions. But the air quivered.

"In that case, you will appreciate the offer I have just made."

"On the contrary, I haven't the smallest intention of accepting it."

"You are a fool!"

"And you—are you a rogue, Beaufort?" It was said almost regretfully.

"I have warned you," the elder Sax repeated.

"Then take it from me—I am not to be warned."

"You will regret it," said Beaufort, after a pause.

"Threats?" Lionel's brows flickered ironically upward; for a moment he looked very like his elder brother—a living, vivid picture of what Beaufort might have been, if blood, instead of ice-water, had been pumped into his veins.

"You bloody thief!" said Beaufort. He was still smiling—that is to say, his lips were drawn back in a rictus from the even, greyish line of his teeth.

"I have stolen nothing of yours," hotly retorted Lionel. He became conscious, for the first time, of the scores of sketches of María Pía that were pinned on the walls around them; she had implored him to use discretion with Beaufort, to make no present admissions, but he was bitterly tempted to disregard her wishes. Why not have it out now, for good and all?

"Yours is a pretty morality, my dear brother! that bends to its own purposes the sacred mission of your art," Beaufort was sneering. "How charmingly you must have hoodwinked Papa, to get yourself established here, in this agreeable privacy—so well adapted for the amorous rendezvous!" Under the frozen frontal his rage was seething at Lionel's defiance, his usually balanced intelligence reeled under an onslaught of images whose origin was the black-barred brows that met him, in every medium, wherever he turned his eyes. "No wonder you have made progress, with so complaisant a model!" he cried, and flung out his shaking hand to point around the walls. "How many visits account for this precious harvest? And what privileges did you reap, in addition to those of the brush and the palette?"


The door behind the speaker opened outwards, and neither had noticed that, in entering, Beaufort had left it on the latch. When Lionel's knuckles connected with the point of his brother's jaw, Beaufort fell backwards, and the crash of his body against the outward-bursting door was followed by its uneven thud and clatter down the stairs. Lionel held his breath, while his heart suspended its beat; presently he picked up a pair of candles and stepped out,

trembling, on the landing. It was uncannily dark and silent below; with a gasp of relief, he realized that the landlord and his wife must be out. There was a chance, if it was murder, of escape.

His shaking knees bore him, in some fashion, down the stairs and Beaufort was lying there, curiously twisted, and with blood streaming down on to his neck cloth—but not dead. His heart was beating. Lionel fetched water, and, presently, when Beaufort was sufficiently recovered to sit up, brandy. Neither spoke. When some part of an hour had passed, Lionel opened the door into the street. It had been raining, and the wet surfaces reflected the dim, occasional lamps. One of the women from the Backs, sidling along on her way from the Llandoger Trow, accosted him hoarsely; Lionel ignored the grisly summons.

“Haven’t you a horse?”

Supporting himself by the lintel, Beaufort lurched to the door. He had left his horse in charge of a man who had no doubt taken shelter from the rain. Lionel made some gesture of accompanying him, ignoring which, Beaufort limped out into the thin, expiring drizzle. Under the nearest lamp he turned and looked back at his brother, and Lionel, stepping in, quietly closed and bolted the door.



CHAPTER XV

I

THE discovery and arrest of a spy at Triton Lodge provided Bristol with its next sensation; the town seemed to have recovered its colourful character. A goggle-eyed scullery-maid told her friend the carter, who arrived in the Sarazen yard, his tongue dripping with the new scandal. The Frenchwoman had been arrested and taken off to Fishponds jail! "Sarve 'em right, every bloody one o' them Frenchies!" was the general verdict, but a few, gentler or better educated than their fellows, remembered that Madame Deschamps had always been a very polite, well-spoken lady: a bit stiff, perhaps, but that only went to show she was one of "the quality"; and it was shocking to think of her shut up with all the foreign riff-raff that the wars had brought into Fishponds. And Lord Lionel had galloped off to see the Governor as soon as he heard the news, but nothing had come of it, so far as any one knew.

"I left them uneasy, but insisting that nothing could be done pending further orders, since the instructions came from London," Lionel was saying. "What next are we to do, aunt Pallas? Do you think my father could help us?"

"Let me think." She pressed her fingers to her temples; the two young faces, Lionel's and María Pía's, strained towards her, Lionel's the more agitated of the two. María Pía's brows made a black bar across her eyes, her lips were pressed tightly together. Lionel was holding her hand; his clasp tightened as he added:

"You will keep María Pía with you for the present?"

"Yes, my dear, I will keep her."

"Why should I not go home? There is no reason for any one to arrest me! Besides," she added, as the others looked at her silently, "I have nothing with me! I cannot spend my life in these things I have on!"

"We shall send for all you require; sit down at my table and make a list. You will find a lexicon," said Pallas, smiling faintly, "in the drawer; it will help to exercise your English!"

As María Pía sat down, frowning, to her task, the others drew closer to the fire; he spoke in a lowered voice.

"What do you really make of this, aunt Pallas? Do you think, as I do, that Beaufort is behind it?"

Her look betrayed her.

"I think he is out of his mind," muttered Lionel, and told her rapidly about their quarrel, with its sinister ending.

"You know what Beau is: when he is crossed, he is capable of anything."

"Lionel." She laid her hand on his wrist. "I want you to give me a promise."

"I feel sure you would ask me nothing that I could not in honour perform," he answered her, so seriously that she had an impulse to lay her lips

to his brow. He was very beautiful, and very like Orabella; she loved him as though he were her son.

"It is good of you to trust me. Promise that you will do nothing for the present: nothing, I mean, that is irrevocable. Upstairs"—she pointed—"lies someone who may alter everything."

"Is Matthew Flood going to get better?"

"Assuredly. But it may be a long time. Promise me you will be patient, even if"—her glance strayed to María Pía's bent head—"even if your patience is misunderstood."

"Aunt Pallas! I want to marry her—as soon as she gives me her consent."

"She has not yet given it?" An involuntary breath of relief lifted her bosom.

"Is there not every reason, now, that I should press for it? Now, if ever, she needs a protector."

"Leave that to me. But do you not understand me, my dear? She is no longer alone, far from her family—to whom, in my old-fashioned way, I feel you both owe a duty. Cuba is inaccessible, I grant you, and you would have long to wait for a reply from her father; to my mind you are wrong not to wait. But if impatience, or unforeseen circumstances, force you to a decision, it is still your duty, now her grandfather is here, to pay him, and her, the honour of asking for her hand. Ah yes, I know you: artists—romantics—to you these are only tedious formalities; but I must remind you—you do not come of a romantic family, and neither does she. I have heard much, from Madame Deschamps, of the ceremony with which these matters are conducted among the Spanish peoples, and I beg you, on her account no less than on your own, not to ignore the customs, not of her country alone, but of the class to which you belong."

"I understand what you mean; but Matthew Flood is not a Spaniard."

"He is not less likely, on that account, to resent any unseemliness in your conduct of your suit. Surely you must see, my dear, how important it is, for her sake, that there should be no impropriety in the circumstances of your marriage?"

"You are on our side, then, aunt Pallas?" he interrupted her. His smile was brilliant; she shrank from it.

"On that I have nothing to say."

"Oh, but you are; I know it. If only you could persuade my mother—but no one ever will. . . ." He groaned, then made a visible effort, which touched her deeply, to throw his despondency aside. "Aunt Pallas, what is Matthew Flood like? Shall I be able to talk to him, as I talk to you?"

"How can one tell what a person is like who is still seeking for himself? His memory comes and goes; sometimes he knows me—or I fancy he does—sometimes I am a stranger."

"He must be extraordinarily strong, even to have lived through his experiences."

"He is the strongest man I ever knew. It is time you went home, Lionel, my dear."

"I may visit you in the morning?" he cajoled her.

She was about to say yes, when a new thought flashed into her mind. This new situation would embroil her with Orabella with a vengeance!

Housing María Pía under her roof, giving Lionel his liberty to see her whenever he liked—Orabella could say with justice that she was conniving at the affair. And Matthew; how long would it be before she had to answer for her actions to Matthew?

"And what about your work?" she demanded, with pretended sternness. "How many hours, pray, have you spent this week with the good Mr Bird?" Lionel looked guilty.

"I had no idea you were such a martinet, aunt Pallas!" he protested.

"You will find me more than a martinet, if you try to take advantage of the welcome you have always found here, to see more of María Pía than I consider proper," she told him forthrightly. "If, when your classes are finished, we should chance to be at home, we shall receive you; if we are not, there are to be no complaints, no sighs of injury. You may be in love, young man"—she tapped him lightly on the cheek—"but you are not an accepted suitor; take care not to behave as though you were."

"But—but—what will María Pía do?" he gasped naïvely. "I'm afraid she does not yet gain much amusement from reading in English; she is, I regret to inform you, so unwomanly as to detest her needle! And I'm sure you are too busy, between your hospital and your attendance on your private patient, to sit gossiping, which is the one thing she really enjoys!"

"And she will now learn to enjoy other things," was the firm answer. "She will continue her English lessons with Flora Wardell, and I hope to instruct her in the maintenance of an English household—a subject in which she is quite as ignorant as you are yourself. A nice business you would make of it, you two, setting up house together!" But her heart misgave her as she said it.

"Well, pray keep her with you all the time," Lionel was fain to reply "Without that I should not know an instant's peace!"

"You can have all the peace you like—to get on with your painting," said Pallas dryly.

A petulant voice came from the writing desk at the farther end of the room "How do you spell *medias* in English? I cannot find it anywhere."

II

At the end of a month María Pía knew she was not much enjoying her visit to Pallas. She was up against an authority she could not defy as, latterly, she had defied Madame Deschamps. The courtesy of a guest enjoined on her certain considerations with which she had not been troubled at Triton. She was also uneasily suspicious of a schooling she believed herself to have outgrown, and the early, healthy hours at St. Michael's did not agree with her.

Pallas breakfasted at seven, and took it for granted María Pía would companion her; she ignored sighs and yawns with well-bred composure, allowed so politely critical a gaze to linger on a disorderly head that María Pía blushed crimson and made haste to apologize for a too hurried toilet, and, presumably in exercise of her pupil's English, would often read to her short extracts from her correspondence or the weekly paper, with frequent pauses to make sure she was not travelling too fast for María Pía's under-

standing. It was very different from the leisurely course of Madame Deschamps's *régime*, with its brief, well-defined hours of study; María Pía began to feel she was having lessons all the time—a ridiculous state of affairs for a grown-up young woman! Or Pallas would question her intelligently upon her travels and her life in foreign countries; and here she would manage better, for she was by no means a fool, and was extremely observant; but it was tiresome being obliged all the time to express herself in English.

Pallas retired to bed at ten, and saw María Pía to her room, before summoning Pilgrim to her nightly duties.

"If, my dear, you are serious about setting up an English household, you must learn to accommodate yourself to English ways. I am sorry if it inconveniences you, but my servants have been with me for many years, and I can't add more to their work than already is necessary, owing to your grandfather's illness," she said firmly, when María Pía protested that, retiring at such an hour, she could not possibly sleep. "Then you may read, my dear; it is not a course recommended to young ladies, and I can't imagine what my dear Mama would have said if Orry or I had threatened our looks and our eyesight by reading in bed! Still, Pilgrim shall put extra candles in your room——"

"But what am I to read? I can't read English—for pleasure!"

This aspect of the case had slipped Pallas's memory. After a pause, she laid her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Tell me, my child: since you were in England, what has become of your religion?"

"I think," said María Pía, when she had got over her surprise, "I cannot be very religious. If I were, I would not contemplate marrying with a heretic—no?" Recalling a little late that Pallas was a "heretic," she coloured, as she murmured, "You will excuse me!"

"You haven't seen a priest since your arrival? No; for there is no Catholic community here, since the abolition of Father Scudamore's mass house."

"No, and I can't say I feel the worse for it," said María Pía frankly. "Papa, you know, was never what they call *dévoté*: he had cause not to be," she added darkly, "and, as a matter of fact, there is not much devotion in Cuba, except among a few of the old Catholic families, like the de Corias—my aunt Isabela married a de Coria—and the Gamborena crowd; though we all go to mass and make our confessions. It is odd you should concern yourself about my religion, seeing that you yourself are"—she sought for a less offensive word than heretic, failed to find it, and smiled.

"I know; there is much bitterness in England against those we call"—it was Pallas's turn to smile—"Papists! How foolish it is to fix labels on people, things, ideas. Papist or heretic, we seek to worship God in our own way, and to me there is a kind of impudence in striving to force our way on other people. But I believe in the discipline of a religious form, whatever it may be, and I am sorry you are unable to follow yours. Don't neglect your prayers, my child; prayer is a power for good, and we can't have too much of that in our daily lives."

She was conscious, in the gentle, gradual moulding of María Pía's will to hers, of performing an act of service—perhaps to Lionel: more certainly to María Pía herself, in helping her to adjust herself to a life whose fringes,

up to the present, she had no more than fingered. Nor was there ever absent from her mind the vital importance of the impression the girl would make on her first meeting with her grandfather. That strange combination of the unregulated schoolgirl with the hardened and sophisticated woman of the world would almost certainly either conquer or alienate Matthew for ever; she prayed to God it might be the former.

And so the days, weeks, and presently a month went by, and on a hot August morning the devil entered into María Pía.

She understood perfectly the necessity for strict guardianship that was exercised over her walks abroad. To begin with, it hardly irked her; it was the rule, in Cuba, that no woman should be seen in the streets without her dueña, a man-servant, and even perhaps a maid in attendance. Despite the freedom of her life on Buonaventura, she had grown used to this during her visits to Havana; she made nothing of the fact that when she walked out with Flora Wardell, Joseph was always a few paces behind them—an arrangement, by the way, which caused some inconvenience to the household, much pleasure to Joseph, and corresponding annoyance to his wife Carrie, who complained to her mistress that “that great, idle nigger would sooner be traipsing round the shops with Miss María than doing his proper work at home!” Pallas had been obliged to engage two more maidservants, one to help Carrie in the kitchen and the other to relieve Pilgrim in her attendance on the sick room.

María Pía hated being away from Triton. It gave her a feeling that the place was slipping out of her hands; as the so-far unconscious presence of her grandfather was a menace to her sense of possession. She had only seen him once; when, the day after his arrival, she was taken upstairs to the room that had been Ralph and Lydia Burmester’s, to look upon *legend* in bone and a thin, discoloured web of flesh. The coverlet, peaked by the sharpness of ribs, hips and knees, defined like a shroud the immense length that stretched between the promontories of head and feet; it was a strangely impersonal form, inhuman even, withdrawn into its mysterious oblivion. She breathed:

“C’est là mon gran’père? Il aurait dû être bien beau.”

It was her only comment; behind it she hid her enormous disconcertion, her resentment of this *revenant*, who came to disturb the hardly established pattern of her existence: to take Triton from her——!

She was always inventing excuses to go back to Triton; there were no grounds for forbidding her, so long as she went accompanied. She would run into the house, with a quick glance around her, and a laugh of relieved contentment, on seeing that everything was as it was before.

“It is fine, my house?” she would cry to Flora Wardell—her usual companion, and when Flora had paid her tribute of sincere admiration to the beauties of Triton, she would laugh again, like a child, seize her hand, and drag her upstairs, or downstairs, pointing out the many objects of beauty and value it contained. Picking up a goblet of inimitable Bristol glass, one of a pair that had come into the possession of Hercules’ father at the time of the coronation ceremonies of Queen Anne, she cried:

“There, isn’t that beautiful? Is it not rare and uncommon?”

“It’s the most elegant thing; oh, do pray handle it carefully,” gasped

Flora, as María Pía raised it with something like a Bacchic gesture above her head.

"It doesn't matter; it's mine," was the gay answer, and, as Flora's eyes continued to follow the precious object with a mixture of admiration and anxiety, she added: "And now I give it to you! Yes, yes, indeed: I insist. What is the use of having beautiful things if one cannot make presents to people one likes?"

"Oh, no, Miss de Lorcha! Indeed, you mustn't! It's much, much too valuable a thing to give to me—or indeed to any one," said Flora earnestly; she knew how her mother prized the few small pieces of old Bristol she had inherited from the family collection.

"If you will not have it I shall send it as a present to your mother. You have a mother, have you not? Why don't you bring her to call on me? I should enjoy showing her my house; pray bring her, and say that I shall be honoured to have her opinion on some of my belongings," concluded María Pía, with a royal gesture.

Giving became a mania with her; it was her way of evidencing possession. The most casual visitors to the house—people who called on matters of business, when she happened to be there, pedlars, enlists of charity, found pewter, china, silver pressed into their hands, and hurried away, lest the obviously mad chatelaine of Triton should change her mind. Flora, in deep distress, reported these promiscuous givings to Pallas, who spoke to María Pía about them, and was answered coldly:

"The things are my own; I have a right, have I not, to do with them as I please?"

Pallas could not bring herself to say to the girl that they were no longer hers; she saw the consciousness of it in María Pía's eyes; hers was the defiance of a person who knows she is doing wrong. It was a last, desperate exertion of the power soon to be taken from her by the one who lay upstairs.

On this particular morning she had remembered something she decided she would like to give to Lionel; she had shown it to him already—a broad belt of tanned leather, ornamented with a faint, hardly discernible tracery in gold; made to buckle round the waist and to carry two pistols, which were thrust into decorated pockets on either side. On the day of Madame Deschamps's arrest the pair of them had been admiring the belt and the weapons, and María Pía, who had often helped Santiago to clean and oil his firearms, had insisted on cleaning and recharging the pistols, which she handled with an expertness that amazed and charmed Lionel.

"I wager you I am as good a shot at a target as you!" she had boasted, and had proved as good as her word, when they went into the garden and vied with one another in shooting at a wand. First they balanced an earthen pot on the top of it, and then an apple, and finally amused themselves by splitting the wand.

Pallas had already gone to the hospital, and Flora had not arrived. Actually she was sick in bed, with one of the fits of headache and nausea which were the penalty of overwork and over-conscientiousness in attention to her duties. The little boy who had been despatched before breakfast at the Wardells' with a note to explain the reason of her absence, had fallen in with companions, had been decoyed into playing knucklebones, and had only remem-

bered the note some half-hour after the bell had summoned him to school : when a preposterous boo-hooing and the bawled assertion that he was sure to be beaten by Miss Wardell when he got home earned him a preliminary caning that did nothing to soothe his guilty conscience.

And María Pía, after hanging about the house and garden, tapping her foot with impatience and composing a haughty speech of reproof for Miss Wardell, came to her decision.

Never had Triton looked so lovely as that morning. The whole house was golden and balmy with summer's heat, the floors reflected sunlight like mirrors, the garden, for all its long neglect, was like a bouquet. Pencils of gold picked out the design of a tapestry, the convoluted tendrils of a carved vine; china and pewter held the green reflections of the out-of-doors, and room after room seemed to welcome her with a richness and warmth of colour which had never been there before. It was no longer cold, repressive, and she suddenly knew the reason for this mysterious change. It was because she had come here *alone*; the old, capricious house had reserved its greeting for this very moment, and, with an impulse as new to her as it was strange, she suddenly turned and pressed her lips to the lintel by which she stood. "Have no fear; I have come, and I will never leave you," she whispered.

It was desperately exciting, being alone. She could hear the servants moving about in their part of the house, but they did not come to disturb her. She found the pistol-belt, and much beside. Opening a chest in search of the powder flash she had tossed inside on the previous occasion, she came on the suit of Matthew's clothes that had almost been the cause of a quarrel between Lionel and Madame Deschamps, when he wanted to paint her in them. It gave her a delightful sense of irresponsibility to fling off her dress and push her long, slim legs into the breeches. They had always been too large in the waist, and it amused her to lash the belt around them. She swaggered, she indulged in attitudes before the mirror: "*Olá, María Pía! Estás muy hombre!*" she was pleased to apostrophize herself. There was no getting away from it; she was much better looking as a man than as a girl. Now, all that she wanted was a horse. . . .

Her heart nearly stopped beating as she remembered. In one of the out-houses which, since the commandeering of the stables, they had been obliged to use for stabling, was the horse that Lionel had hired for her. *Why not?* One could ride for an hour across Brandon Hill, and beyond, without meeting a soul; and if one did, who was likely to pay attention to a young gentleman, enjoying a lonely gallop on an August morning?

III

The little horse rose like a swallow, she saw the glimmer of water under her, and made a good landing on the farther bank. She patted its neck approvingly as it cantered on; Beaufort was not the only Sax who knew how to choose horses. Let them but get to Cuba, and Lionel should know what quality in horseflesh meant!

She had lost all sense of time and distance. Her body was glowing with exercise and she felt the sweat running pleasantly down her ribs; she was

enormously thirsty. Nothing, however, but green fields and trees was in sight.

She turned reluctantly, taking the sun for her guide. As she came out into a lane, she saw three horsemen clustered at a little distance; they were standing still, as though waiting for someone, and, as the sun was in her eyes, she had ridden some little distance towards them before she saw they were masked.

She knew, instantly, her danger; and her first thought was of how much more Lionel's horse was capable. She had been tiring it out, taking it across streams, hedges and an occasional sliprail; but it was a young animal, of admirable stamina, not too intelligent, but stout-hearted enough, under proper handling, to go till it dropped.

The glance which had given her the masks gave her something more: that flea-bitten grey, on the left of the group, was as familiar to her as the beast she was riding. It had stood for hours at Triton steps, while Captain Brough Hanson paid his calls. Her lip curled with momentary disdain; did he suppose that a girl to whom horses were at least as important as human beings would fail to recognize it?

Could she do what she had to do, on an English horse, with an English saddle? Doubt clipped coldly round her heart, but it was the only way. Hanson's grey, shabby as it appeared, was a famous 'chaser, and the other two were long-legged, sinewy animals that would easily overtake Lionel's tired horse. María Pía crouched a little in the saddle, keeping her hands low, out of sight of the watchers, who turned leisurely in her direction, and spread themselves out, as though by accident, across the lane. When she lifted them, the reins were knotted on her horse's neck.

As she kicked it, it started forward with a swing that, for a second, nearly unseated her. She was galloping, head down, both hands tugging at the pistols that clung stiffly to the holsters. The right came away, the left resisted—her left hand was the weaker, and she doubted if she could so much as pull the trigger: a doubt which was speedily solved, for the pistol went off into the holster, missing her leg and the horse's shoulder by a fraction, the bullets cut up the dust and one of the other horses, which had received a splinter, reared and squealed.

She felt a shock on her right, Lionel's animal staggered and she felt the air between her and the saddle, as someone snatched at the bridle, and she fired, at pointblank range, into a masked face.

There was a stench of gunpowder and a yell, she found herself clinging round the horse's neck; it was standing still, shivering, with something—she did not pause to see what—lying at its feet, but she struck it with all the power of her clenched fist, and it started forward again. There was a splatter, and, presently, the regular gallop of hoofs on the highway after her. . . .

It pleased her to ride with leisurely arrogance through St. Michael's gates; her pursuers had not dared to keep up the chase when it brought them on to the highroad, which, at that hour of a Saturday morning, had its sprinkling of traffic, its probable inconvenient witnesses to the attempted abduction of a young Bristol lady. She had prepared a gay apology for Pallas's reproaches; she had better not hear, for the present, of the disquieting incident. But no

intended reproaches accounted for the deadly pallor of Pallas's face, as she came quickly out to intercept María Pía's entrance.

"My dear, prepare yourself for a shock. My sister—Orabella—is here."

Her knees melted. Orabella—Lionel's mother. A sudden, burning awareness of her dishevelment robbed her of all her self-confidence; she made a movement of pitiful modesty.

"*Madre mia!* How can I see her—like this?"

"I will ask her to excuse you for a quarter of an hour." With a sudden impulse of yearning love, she drew the girl to her heart. "My dear—my sweet! I do pray God you may be happy!"

When she rejoined Orabella, she said:

"Orry, as there's a God in heaven, if you hurt that girl I will never forgive you!"

"Indeed!" Lady Mildenhall, in feathers and a wilderness of Indian gauze, was formidable. "She has not, for example, hurt me? Let me tell you, Pallas, the shoe is on the other foot; I find it impossible, for the present, to forgive your treachery, whose full wickedness I never realized until to-day. Can you picture my feelings, on arriving at Triton, when I was told that the creature was here, under your protection?"

"You might have learned it before," returned Pallas coolly, "if you had not been so foolish as utterly to cut our correspondence. A nice state of affairs, Orry! And 'twould break Mama's heart, if she were here to-day."

"You support this scandalous match?" cried Lady Mildenhall, waving aside the appeal to sentiment. "You aid and abet your nephew in marrying a negress?"

"Don't be a fool. It won't make matters better or worse, if you call María Pía de Lorchá by names that don't apply to her. An African grandmother doesn't make her negress—any more than the fact that we are supposed to have among our ancestors a Prussian makes us into Germans! It seems to me that you all—and Beaufort in particular—are taking a very peculiar attitude towards this young creole girl, who is certainly, so far as birth and breeding are concerned, your equal, and mine."

"That I should live to receive such insults from my own sister!" gasped Lady Mildenhall, almost overcome by this shocking statement.

"You were always an unreasonable little thing," said Pallas, trying to placate her, "and I was patient with you, as I suppose I shall have to be now. Marrying a Sax didn't make an aristocrat of you, Orry, and it pains me to see you putting on airs about it."

"You are absolutely without heart! Am I talking about aristocracy? I'm sure Lionel could have taken a wife from the gutter, and I'd have been a very angel to her, on his account!"

"No, you wouldn't!" Pallas could not help smiling at this blatant revocation of Orabella's creed. "You're a horrid mother-in-law, darling!—and you needn't think Rory's been complaining to me."

"I should hope not! Considering how that girl bores me, and how Peregrine fell in love with so spiritless a creature is an eternal wonder to me—I'm the very soul of goodness to her. But I shall *not* accept the granddaughter of a negress for a daughter-in-law—not while there is breath in my body to fight against it!"

"Orry, are you absolutely serious?" The speaker's tone had changed; she realized that Orabella's antagonism was not one of those temporary upheavals with which, from time to time, she devastated her family.

"Would you be serious, if your son was about to ruin himself?" Lady Mildenhall snorted furiously. "Oh, I suppose I'm wasting my breath. Your views on marriages of this kind, Pallas, are a disgrace to any decently bred woman; I've always said so behind your back, and now I say it to your face! You set an abominable example in your own household, and I'm a fool to come to you for sympathy."

"No, you're not," said Pallas quietly. "Do you suppose I wish this marriage, any more than you? Do you suppose I don't recognize its shocking possibilities?"

"Ha! So you admit they're shocking?"

"In this case, certainly. Is María Pía to blame for that? You know she is not. If she is the granddaughter of an African negress, she is also Matthew's grandchild."

"I hope you don't offer me that as a sop? If you think I have any kindly feelings towards Matthew Flood, after the way he treated you, you must indeed be crazy. I hate him, and everything that is his——"

"Stop, Orry, for God's sake." For a moment she covered her face with her hands. Presently she lifted her head, and her face was full of pleading. "In a moment you are going to meet María Pía; I think it is a pity, but since you insist, there is nothing I can do to prevent you. If you ever cared for me, or my wishes, I beg you to treat her as you would wish a daughter of your own to be treated. Remember how far she is from her people, how lonely, how helpless she is in this country, of which, as yet, she hardly speaks the language. Try to see her as herself alone—away from that background which inspires in you so much horror. She has so many fine qualities; indeed, I would love her, even if she were not Matthew's granddaughter—and she is more sensitive than you would think, from her proud and bold manner, which belongs to her father's race."

"I wish to God they had never met," muttered Orabella, unable, despite her resentment, wholly to ignore the appeal.

"I echo your wish," said Pallas solemnly "Not from your point of view; though I admit that is to be considered. But because I see very little chance of their being happy together. How can they, with their differences of upbringing and outlook? Each is too young to make allowance for the other; if either succeeds in doing so, it will be Lionel—and that won't last for ever. María Pía, poor child, hasn't yet realized that she has a rival in Lionel's affection——"

"A rival? Who?" cried Orabella with a faint note of hope in her voice.

"The same rival you met yourself, Orry: his work," said Pallas gravely.

In the silence that followed, Orabella's smothered sobs were checked by the sound of a light step, which crossed the marble-tiled hall, and seemed to hesitate at the door.

"It is María Pía; God bless you, Orry, and help you to be kind and wise." Pallas bent to kiss her sister's brow.

"For heaven's sake, you aren't going to leave me alone with the girl?" Orabella clutched Pallas's skirts in her sudden, unreasoning terror.

"Indeed I am; what should I have to add to such a meeting as this?"

"But—but she can't speak English——!"

"She can speak quite enough to make herself understood; and nothing you say is likely to escape her intelligence," Pallas assured her, as she went to the door. When she opened it, María Pía was there, white like death, with her eyes burning holes in the thin mask of her face. Pallas, as she made a movement to let the girl pass, spoke the only Spanish phrase she had learned from her young guest, and spoke it from her heart.

"*Vaya Usted con Dios*," she murmured, as María Pía crossed the threshold of the room.

III

It would have been hard to say which trembled the more: Orabella, or the girl who, despairing of making a proper toilet in the short time allotted, had torn off the riding habit and flung a petticoat and bedgown of muslin over her shoulders; she had brushed out the black tangle of her hair, braided and clubbed it into a ribbon, and descended, with a tremulous humility which all who knew would have pitied her, to ask pardon for her deshabelle from the woman who held all of her future happiness in her hands. In her confusion she looked very young and tender; the hard self-assurance with which she met Caroline Sax was missing, and any but an angry, defensive mother must have taken her in their arms.

Even Orabella, curtsying stiffly, felt the shock of the likeness. The girl was, indeed, the image of Matthew!—who had been dark enough, in all conscience, to pass for a foreigner, one of "the black Floods." She hadn't thick lips, either—though her mouth was sullen, like Matthew's had been, on the day he broke the musical box. No, no, one must not remember foolish things like that—softening things.

"Miss de Lorcha"—her lips quivered a little, she put her fingers to their withered outlines—"I think you know why I have come to see you."

"I am so much honoured, señora." María Pía spoke faintly. She wondered how long her knees would bear her, and if it was permissible to sit down, in one's own house, before the wife of an English grandee.

"I am afraid it is not a very pleasant errand." Orabella had recovered herself; clearly the girl was afraid of her. "I could wish it had not been necessary; but I am quite sure you will appreciate my motives, and realize that there is no personal illwill behind what I have come to say. It seems, Miss de Lorcha, that my son Lionel is—interested in you."

"He—he has given me to understand so, señora."

"But you don't know, of course, that there are many other things—important things—which must take priority of his personal sentiments." Orabella paused; she had rehearsed this conversation so many times on the way that it surprised and confused her to find she could not remember exactly how she had intended to put it. The girl had taken her aback, with her meekness and nervousness; prepared for arrogance, even for insolence (Caroline had confessed that, "out of sheer curiosity," she had paid a call on Beaufort's inamorata), she felt positively affronted by the propriety, the

delicate good manners, of her reception. "I don't suppose you realize, Miss de Lorcha," she continued with asperity, "that my son will some day be a celebrated painter?"

"I have the greatest possible admiration for señor Lionel's art," she stammered.

"No doubt—no doubt you have had many opportunities for admiring it," was the tart rejoinder. "*Too* many, if you will permit me to say so! His painting master tells me that he is quite at a standstill in all his work. . . . I see that he has found a fascinating model, ma'amselle; but one does not make progress that way!"

"I cannot help it if he likes painting me"—there was a faint note of indignation in the speaker's voice; she raised her shoulders and spread out her hands in a fashion which Orabella found "very foreign."

"You can help it," she said sharply, "if he neglects other opportunities to spend his time with you. His father promised that he should go to London and study with one of the great masters when he had exhausted the resources of our local teachers. I hear from my elder son, Beaufort, that Lionel refused an offer to accompany him to town; an offer which was most important for his future career: that he refused it on your account——"

"It is the first I have heard of it."

"Well"—Orabella nodded her head with satisfaction. "Now you have heard of it, what do you propose to do?"

"I? But—but what could I do, señora?"

"I have not inquired, ma'amselle," said Orabella, tightening her lips, "the nature of your own sentiments towards my son. It would be unnecessary and indelicate to do so, for those concern no person save yourself. For your own sake, I hope you have not made too much of the extravagant attentions which are part of the artistic character. But since your continued kindness to Lionel, the fact of your receiving him constantly, would suggest that you entertain some feelings of friendliness towards him, may I point out that the act of a true friend would be to help him to break his associations with Bristol, and send him towards the bright future which all who know him say is designed for him?"

"Señora—forgive me——" She put her hand to her throat as though it hurt her. "Has—has Lionel said—anything——?"

"What Lionel has *said*," returned Orabella icily, "is his affair and mine; there are things which are better forgotten."

"But he has told me that—he loves me."

"I—I am sorry," said Orabella, and her voice betrayed her by trembling, "that you have found it necessary to mention—that."

"But—señora—I love him."

Who, to look at her, could have doubted it? The melting, the softening of the arrogant features, the sudden liquidity of the eyes on whose dark fringes sparkled the dew of her irrepressible tears, the hesitation and wordless appeal of her attitude, must have convinced any one who knew her that María Pía de Lorcha was pleading for her life. Orabella turned her head quickly aside. Implacable as she was, on this subject, the girl's evident sincerity made her uneasy, and she spoke more cruelly than she intended.

"In that case, Miss de Lorcha, you will not ruin his career?"

"But how should I ruin it?" Her fingers had curled into the palms of her hands, and she felt the prick of the nail-tips in the soft flesh.

"I think," said Orabella, rising with a rustle of satins, "that you have understood me." The softness had vanished; María Pía's head reared with her wounded pride.

"I think," she said, in her laborious English, which became more stilted when her emotions were stirred, "that you have not said everything, señora."

Inoffensive as were the words, the tone in which they were spoken stung Orabella to her utmost bitterness.

"Since you ask for it, ma'amselle, I will make myself quite clear. If you marry Lionel, you will cut him off from his home, his family and all the advantages to which, by his parentage, he is entitled."

"Perhaps I can offer him others."

"You will not suggest, ma'amselle, that anything *you* have to offer would compensate him for the loss of those things which, before your unhappy arrival, were dearer to Lionel than anything in the world?"

"It is you who propose to deprive him of them," she pointed out, with a cold justice.

"He will be deprived of them by force of common opinion," said Orabella, her chin quivering. The phrase was unfamiliar to María Pía; she ignored it.

"I did not ask your son to marry me, señora."

"You're quibbling, Miss de Lorcha!"

"Quibbling—what is it? I will tell you something else, which may surprise you. I have not said I would marry him." She raised her hand to check Orabella's exclamation. "You do not think, *par hasard*, that I would find it agreeable to be married to Lionel, and not be accepted by his family? *Por Dios*, señora, that is not the way matters are arranged by my house!"

Orabella found herself gasping. This, indeed, was carrying the war into the enemy's camp! She had not been prepared for this sheer broadside of Cuban pride, before which her own defences rocked like a ship in a gale.

"You see, Miss—Miss de Lorcha"—she was horrified to find herself suddenly conciliatory—"you naturally do not know how these things stand in England. There is the question of religion," she hurried on, beneath the girl's contemptuous glance. "You are a Papist—I mean Catholic: and no Sax has ever married a Catholic. By doing so, Lionel cuts himself out of his inheritance. It is not a great one," she was forced to add, "since he is the youngest son, and Beaufort gets almost everything: but such as it is, what would he do without it?"

"That need not trouble you. My father is one of the wealthiest men in Cuba." It was María Pía's turn to pause and gasp: would he be, if this mysteriously returned grandfather elected to recover and to demand the restitution of his estate?

"You would not take Lionel to Cuba?" It was a cry wrung from a mother's heart.

"If he has no home in England, where else is there for him to go?" came the inexorable question.

Orabella's face grew crimson.

"Are you wicked enough for that?" she whispered.

María Pía shook her head.

"I am not wicked, señora; I know it, and so do you. And I know why you do not want me to marry Lionel. It is not because I am a Catholic, or on account of the money. It is because my grandmother was *negra*—yes, they called her *La Bellísima Negra* in Havana, and she is remembered to this day! She was fine in a fashion you *inglés* know nothing about, and my grandfather married her. *Cuerpo de Dios*, why should he not? When a man sees beauty like that, is he not right to make it his own? If I hate my grandfather, it is for other reasons: he was right to marry my grandmother Sheba, and not to care what people said about marrying a negress."

"Have—have you no shame?" gasped Orabella, now wholly shattered by the onslaught.

"For what have I to have shame? Look in your own family for shame, señora! My father loved my mother, and ran away with her from her convent, though he knew she was *mestiza*, and that, let me tell you, is a much worse sin for a Catholic than for a heretic. Ask your son Beaufort——"

"I will listen no longer to this indecent conversation!" cried Orabella. "I will not hear you boast that you have seduced Beaufort and now propose—oh, my poor, poor Lionel!" As Orabella burst into tears, María Pia first stared, then burst into that loud, brutal laugh which so disconcerted Madame Deschamps.

But she knew, when the elder woman had stumbled from the room, that she was defeated: that she had played her cards badly, that, instead of conciliating Lionel's mother, which had been all her intention, she had antagonized her to an extent which might prove fatal for all. She felt drenched with helplessness: the sudden realization that she now had probably nothing with which to compensate Lionel for the loss of his English inheritance had stolen the remainder of her fighting power. She loved him so much that she ached with it; a groan burst from her lips, as she crushed her hands to her breasts to ease their intolerable, physical pain. Ruin him? God knew how far she was from ruining him; for his welfare she would sacrifice the last drop of her blood. But how could they expect her to surrender him—the last thing that remained to her in life?

Pallas found her in so complete a state of collapse that she was at first horrified. The front of her muslin robe was torn, her head like a Mænad's, her eyes wild with a kind of madness that faded into vacuity when Pallas tried to soothe her.

"I will follow him as his chattel, his mistress—anything he wants—except as his wife! That injury I will not do him—despite his utmost prayers!"

"Hush, hush, my dearest child; you do not know what you are saying."

"Isn't it better to go away of one's own free will than wait to be turned out——?"

"Who will turn you out? Not I, and you know it. Why do you say such things," murmured Pallas, stroking her head.

"And my grandfather?" came the bitter retort. "Why should he treat me better than he treated his own daughter? Can't you see it's madness—madness for me to stay here——?"

"Hush; you do not know your grandfather." This was hysteria, she decided, and must be dealt with sternly. "Come, I will put you to bed. Remember, you have not yet told me the meaning of this morning's ride."

CHAPTER XVI

I

THE news of the failure to abduct María Pía reached, in due time, the Pall Mall lodgings of Beaufort Sax, and accounted for the beating of a valet, the unmerciful bullying of a nervous young secretary, and the absence of a guest at Lady Holland's table. While her ladyship, who did not take such defections easily, tightened her lips—though, at the back of her mind, there lay the uneasy impression that some very unusual circumstance must account for the absence of so punctilious a person—Beaufort chewed the bitter cud of frustrated passion, and wondered what the next step was to be: cursed the diplomatic tangling that kept him dangling between the Court of St. James's and the most important of the foreign embassies—with the prospect of another dash to the Continent clearly, but by no means certainly, on the horizon.

Meanwhile, the sizzling humidity of Bristol summer passed, almost imperceptibly, into the golden days of autumn; well-to-do families, which had migrated to Clifton during the heat, resumed their residence in town. Bristol's summer stench was subsiding; there was, as usual, a lot of newly turned earth in the graveyards, infant mortality had reached its peak for the year, church and chapel congregations rustled in new or renovated mourning, while stone-masons and the composers of mural epitaphs enjoyed their usual autumn prosperity.

Nor did disease stop at the city; its germs were carried into the countryside by travellers, and few of the surrounding villages were immune from the fever epidemics which, in an age ignorant of hygiene, were considered an inevitable accompaniment of hot weather. Paragon got it, and Paragon Hall; two servants were buried; at the end of October the bell tolled for little Peregrine Sax.

Even the course of diplomatic manœuvring may be checked for an important bereavement; Beaufort, as heir, was bound to be present at the interment. He obtained leave—and left town for the West Country, with a settled resolve in his heart.

II

Matthew Flood was sitting up, draped in a bedgown which had been sent for to Triton. Even seated, his size dwarfed the chair and its surroundings; the great framework of his shoulders thrust out the padded stuff like the cross-bar of a scarecrow, and the sharp points of his knees betrayed the length of the limbs the gown concealed. There was still, in his face, in his eyes, something of the look of the lost traveller, who strains forward through a mist, but during the long weeks past a personality had been slowly reshaping itself inside the battered shell: a personality which was now—almost—complete, and needed nothing but physical strength to lend it effectuality.

He had weighed his strength and his weakness deliberately, before consenting to this meeting, for which Pallas had prepared him: as she had prepared him for all the rest. It was she who had convinced him that, among the welter of matters that must be dealt with, the affairs of his granddaughter came first.

To come back from nothing . . . into everything. He knew that if he did not keep a firm grip on this newly equilibrated mind of his, there would soon be a blank again. Every action, almost every thought, was experimental; their effects on other people were important, for he could not yet be sure that any one except Pallas herself, and perhaps Fanny Pilgrim, accepted his sanity. These two had given him the most valuable thing they had to give: privacy, in which to find his way back to civilization. It was that which had healed him, even more than their devoted nursing: for little was known, in those days, of the disorders of the mind.

Slowly percepts built themselves into concepts; the senses revived—and, with them, forgotten proprieties of conduct, which, in his weakness, he knew he had not observed. It was then that Pallas had withdrawn, and allowed Pilgrim to carry on the ministrations, knowing that the servant's presence embarrassed him less than her own.

And, for the meeting with María Pía, he insisted upon being out of bed. Pallas protested, while secretly rejoicing at the new obstinacy that challenged her long authority.

"Time has not taught you discretion."

"Nor you, ma'am, modesty. Is it a custom of these days for ladies to invade a man's room before he is clothed?" He gestured impatiently to Joseph, who stood grinning by the bedside, the gown in his hands; he had just finished the task of shaving his new master.

"I have seen you less clothed than you are now," she said coolly. "Pilgrim came for me. It is very mischievous and very wrong of you to disobey the doctor's orders—not to speak of my own."

"I haven't escaped the bondage of men to accept that of women—and with women I class doctors; for they're old women, every mother's son of them."

"You would have fared ill without both," she retorted with asperity. She knew that her own hands were shaking, and went to sit down, while Joseph eased the fur-collared and padded bedgown over the skeleton-like shoulders, and knotted a cravat round Matthew's neck. She thought: "It is a *man* who sits there: no longer a helpless, sexless deadweight between sheets."

"Is yo' comf'ubble, Mars' Flood? Is yo' comf'ubble an' easy?" Joseph was asking. The sunken eyes stared at him.

"What's your name?"

"Why, Mars' Flood, yo' know Joseph—dat wuz Lilliput! Lilliput dat yo' ride on yo' hawse till his teef done near fall out!"

The grey head nodded; whether in recognition or acceptance she was not sure, until—

"You must have outgrown your collar," said Matthew, and, turning to Pallas, "did you get him a new one?"

"No, no; Joseph is a free man." As the door closed behind the negro she added: "A law was passed, nearly thirty years ago, that as soon as a slave sets foot on English ground, he becomes free. That," she could not resist adding, "was one of our smaller successes. Well, shall I send Maria to you?"

"Maria?"

"I should say María Pía; since she came to live with me we have dropped the second name. It seems," said Pallas, smiling faintly, "to bring her nearer; to make her less—foreign." Should she add a plea for the girl, who, whatever might be her emotions at coming for the first time face to face with her grandfather, concealed them behind the cold, dark mask which she had worn ever since the day of Orabella's visit? ("It will be long, Orry, before I forgive you for that!") Or should she let nature take its course?

"At what are you looking?" She started violently; she had hardly realized, until he spoke, that her eyes were fixed upon him. "It is an unpleasant sight, is it not?" He touched the distorted cheek-bone, the purple scar that covered it; he said with a grim humour which, for some reason, chilled her: "Thirty-five years—the half of a life—lost! Thirty-five years—wasted: and one can only come once on earth. To have, at the end of the vanished years, nothing but this to show—! It is no very reassuring sight for one's—descendants."

"When you were young," she heard herself saying, and it was as though she talked to a ghost, "you were very handsome; but at your most handsome, Matthew, you never looked like this. Your—insolence of youth gave you a kind of magnificence: something that carried you a long way with very emotional, or very inexperienced people. But now"—she said is with a kind of wonder—"you are grey and bleak, like an old tree: like the last survivor of a dead forest. I think—you need not regret the lost years. . . ." She turned and went hurriedly from the room. And he waited, consciously shepherding his strength.

As she rose from her formal curtsy, María Pía felt, against her will, the venerableness of this figure: felt a grimness of resurrection in the eyes, dead like unpolished onyx; black under brows as black as her own: and recognized, with a shock, the likeness to herself. And he, on his part, did the same; their eyes met, and held, but it was like a meeting of enemies. Their enmity seemed to go back, back, to days before she was born, before she was conceived; and it was rooted in love—which is the worst sort of enmity.

"So, miss, you call yourself my granddaughter."

"I am your granddaughter."

The deep voice, with its alien accent, went through Matthew like a sword; sun and heat entered the room, and the scent of tropical lands. It was not what he had expected—the high twittering voice of Sheba, any more than her pride, which showed in her bearing, deep, still, stiff-necked, was the unconscious vanity of the negress.

"How do you come by your name, María Pía de Lorcha?" It was the first time since her arrival in Bristol that she had heard her name correctly pronounced, save by Beaufort Sax.

He saw her moisten her lips—the first sign she had given of nervousness.

"My mother, María Cayetúña Flood, married Santiago de Lorcha y Cerna de Buonaventura," she told him. Her right hand, strong and broad, like his own, clenched the folds of her gown in front; the whiteness of the knuckles caught his eye, and also the thin gold band embedded in the fourth finger.

"Give me your hand. The other." She had given the left. "Who gave you that ring?"

"My father. It was my mother's, but she never wore it."

He said, after a pause:

"I also prefer you not to wear it. Take it off."

"It will not come off," she told him, with satisfaction.

He tested the truth of her words, and hurt her. Her teeth sank sharply into her lower lip, but, though she winced, she made no sound. He looked at her closely.

"You know what it is?"

"Yes. It is my grandmother's wedding ring."

"And so," he said, when he had digested this, "you have taken possession of Triton?"

"It is many years," she muttered, "since they said you were dead. Mama had a right to it, and, after her, it is mine."

"After her; where is she, your mama?"

"She is dead."

"And your father?"

"He is in Cuba. After Mama died, he married my cousin, Leonor de Montalba."

"Have you brothers and sisters?"

"I was Mama's only child. There is now, perhaps, a boy. I do not know. Buonaventura is a great property. Papa wanted a son."

"You do not speak English badly," he said reflectively. "How does that come about?"

"I have been a long while in England. I have had lessons."

"For what have you come?" As she made no immediate answer, he leaned forward a little; his eyes seemed to plunge into hers. "Yes, you are like me. It is unfortunate; but for that you might have been a beauty! Tell me for what you have come, for no one—no woman—takes that long journey unless she seeks for something: something that means more to her than her home, her family, her lover."

"I came to look after my rights," she answered stubbornly.

He stared at her dimly.

"Your rights? What are they?" He was curious to know what she meant by her rights, but her eyelids were lowered, her lips pressed sullenly together. "You have courage," said Matthew slowly. "That is as it should be; having my blood you should know no fear. Yet—it is said, only fools are never afraid. How much courage have you? Are you a fool, or are you frightened—sometimes?"

"Of what have I to be frightened?" was the scornful answer. "Am I to be frightened of *you*, Grandfather?" She laughed shortly, seemed about to say something more, and closed her lips again. But for all the façade of self-confidence with which she met what she felt was his antagonism, the palms of her hands were very cold.

"Don't you know"—she bent forward a little to catch the words that came from scarcely moving lips—"don't you know that bastardy carries no rights?"

Her body sprang upright like a released spring.

"I am not a bastard!"

"Your mother was."

The blackness of the pupils flooded all the dark iris of her eyes as she answered him in Spanish.

"It is a lie. And you know it, my Grandfather."

"It is not a lie," he told her in her own language. "I was never married to your grandmother."

He saw her throat swell, as though she were strangling. He saw Sheba, in one of her fits of passion, crouching to tear him with her small, clawed fingers. He saw Sheba, all radiant and provocative of his youthful lust, on Jimmy Montcalm's porch, where first by firelight he had seen her; and he saw her limp body across his knee in the coach, when she was dying: and all of his soul seemed to leap out of his body, crying out for forgiveness.

"You are my granddaughter; so much I am pleased to acknowledge. Let the rest go: save that you must not indulge foolish pretensions to which you are not entitled. Let Triton be your English home—if you require one——"

She answered him with lips dragged back across teeth that were clenched in a glittering double line.

"I see what you are. You are like all white men who marry coloured women: it is all right in a foreign country, but when you return to your own land you do not wish to remember! I remind you of Sheba, so you hate me, as you hated Mama, when you left her alone to starve in a foreign country——"

"That I did not! I left provision that she should be properly cared for, as it seems she was."

"A little money! Left at the disposal of people who, when it was finished, would have turned Mama out to fend for herself in the alleys of Havana! If they had not heard you were dead—if they hadn't hoped to gain more for themselves—do you suppose she would ever have been looked after? No, Grandfather, I am not a fool! I know you wouldn't have deserted Mama if she had been the daughter of a woman of your own race. Like all the *ingleses*, you look on negroes as slaves, as the instruments of your pleasure: afterwards you want no more to do with them—no reminders, no responsibilities. *Pobrecita Mama!* She forgave you; it is easy to forgive the dead. She taught me to light candles and to say prayers——"

By a supreme effort Matthew had dragged himself from the chair; his clutch on her shoulders supported him, but there was no weakness in the eyes that burned level with her own.

"I have sinned: but, by the living God, I will not be reproached for my sin by you!"

She dragged herself from his clasp, leaving him swaying.

"Mama hated poor Grandmama Sheba! It wasn't her fault—it was the way she was treated at Santa Clara. If she had only known—it was you she should have hated! It is your fault she was born *mestiza*—with hair she had to cover up under a little cap! I wish to God I had hair like Mama! I would not hide it—I would flaunt it—I'd stick gold pins in it, like Sheba did, to make people look at me——"

"Hold your tongue, you——!"

"As long as I am alive, Grandfather, you shall not be able to forget Sheba! I'll not be de Lorcha, and I'll not be Flood: I'll be Sheba, who was the victim

Of your lust; I'll be Mama, who paid for it in shame and suffering; I'll be every *mestiza* who has ever had cause to curse her inheritance——"

"What cause have you," he asked, as she stopped, gasping for breath, "to curse yours?"

"What does that matter to you? You come back—to ruin us." But her breath came sobbingly, and she was spent with her outburst. It was in a child's voice that she whimpered: "I have not even Triton for my own!"

"Ah! So you're enough of a Flood to care about Triton!"

He loosed his hold on the back of the chair to which he had clung when she moved away from him, and took two steps, testing himself. It was the first time he had attempted to walk alone. His head swam; the floor seemed very far away, and to be built in curious waves. He gained, however, the stool beside the fire: the stool on which Pallas had been sitting. He could not, without help, perform that difficult business of bending the knees and sitting down, so he snapped his fingers peremptorily: "Your arm!" It surprised them both when she gave it: that is to say, she held it out, with the back of the clenched hand upward, like a bar of steel. He looked up at her slyly, half smiling, as he deliberately allowed all his weight to rest upon it; he felt her brace herself—and let himself drop.

"I am not in a fit state to talk with you. You have been told—or perhaps you have invented—many lies; you will have, sooner or later, to choose between them and the truth. Perhaps you will choose the lies—for that is the easier way. If you were a man," said Matthew, and paused; their eyes met, and a strange thing was happening: a kind of transfusion, a flowing from flesh to flesh, of knowledge—as though the momentary contact had given them, more fully than the words that could not be spoken, an understanding of each other's hearts. As understanding, it was poor and incomplete, inchoate and full of lacunæ: no more, perhaps, than an embryonic recognition, an acknowledgment, in each other, of the same qualities, the same defects, the same pride, obstinacy and lack of surrender; but the bitter edge, the will to wound, had gone from the encounter. "If you were a man," said Matthew quietly, "I should know how to deal with you. Now—go."

She had an impulse to cry out, to batter on those closed gates: "I am your kinswoman; but for you I should not be here; to whom, if not to you, am I to turn?" But pride withheld the cry that might have softened him. Her head was high as she walked to the door, where she turned and curtsied, saying in a tone not wholly free from the tinge of irony:

"I hope you will soon be well!"

III

It was raw, and drizzling with rain, and they had gone half-way round the square before eliciting the information that "the young gentleman who painted" lived, not in the square, but at Mistress Bennett's, just round the corner.

Lionel had been preparing for the sad journey to Paragon; he was sitting by the blazing logs, with a drawing-board on his knee, writing a last word to his beloved, to whom, that morning, he had said farewell with as much despair

as though their separation was to be for a year, instead of, at the most, twenty-four hours. He could not believe it when the door opened to admit María Pía.

She had ordered Carrie to remain downstairs, and was breathless with her rapid ascent, which had brought colour to her chilled face. To Lionel she looked wild, and utterly beautiful; the board clattered from his knee, the ink bottle flung its dark stain across the boards as he sprang to take her in his arms.

"My darling, I can't believe it! What has happened?"

They sank together, clasped in each other's arms, on the settle from which he had just risen; the hem of her gown trailed in the ink; they thought of nothing but each other's lips, pressed so desperately, so hungrily close—his burning, hers cold with the rain. She caught his hand and clasped it over her breast, and he felt the pounding of her heart, and her shivering, which was partly the cold, under her thin gown.

"Dearest"—he had taught her the word, and her use of it, with the alien intonation, made him feel as though she were stroking his heart—"we must not wait any longer. *Entiendes?* We must go now."

"What is it?" He was stunned by her importunacy.

"I have seen my grandfather." She spoke with a breathless incoherence, striking his shoulder with her clenched fist. "Do not persuade me, Lionel! I will never stay with a man like that. You were wrong—oh, how wrong, my dearest, in saying we must wait. No—no, listen. You think, because you love me, that every one must do the same. *Dios mio*, who has loved me, since I came to England? No one—no one, I say, save you, has ever loved me, since Mama died; I have nobody else in the world, save only you."

"Am I enough?" He was overwhelmed by this sudden and complete capitulation. "Oh, my darling, do you mean I am enough?"

"So long as you love me."

"And that will be for ever!"

"Then why do we wait? Your family will never agree, mine does not matter. If you love me, Lionel"—she joined her hands so piteously that he felt moisture come into his eyes—"let us go *now*! Never mind Paragon—never mind anything; it is the first time I have asked you anything!"

"My beloved, you know I exist only to please you: but—but—" The bright flame of colour she loved to see ran up under his clear skin; she made a little noise of pleasure and touched his cheek delicately with the tips of her fingers. Lionel, who hated blushing, frowned and jerked his head away, then, lest the brusquerie should have hurt her, caught her fingers and laid them to his lips. His brain was whirling; how go now, and cut the funeral, dealing his mother an even heavier blow than the elopement would do? To absent himself on such an occasion was to offer an affront to the entire family, and grievously to wound his gentle sister-in-law Aurora; to absent himself on such a pretext—! Besides: "You know, my darling, I have not very much money; I—my father gives me an allowance, but I am afraid I have spent most of it—until the next comes in," he explained confusedly. There were, in fact, less than a couple of guineas in his pockets, barely enough to tip the grooms and servants, a point on which, since leaving home, Lionel was punctilious. How ludicrous a position! It was evident from her reply that she thought the same.

"*Qué disparate!* There are at least moneylenders."

Of course there were; he knew his brothers often had recourse to them; William was always in difficulties—from which he was usually extracted by his mother. His country life, his economical tastes—on what was there to spend money apart from his paints and canvases?—and his indifference to luxuries had kept Lionel well inside his allowance, and he was surprised to find with what distaste he contemplated a measure which to Peregrine, Beaufort or William would have been the obvious one. His present impecuniosity was easily explained, since he never came to see his mistress without some gift in his hand, and he had already realized that, if Matthew Flood gave his consent to their marriage, he must by some means raise a sufficient sum to start them creditably on their matrimonial career. But how this was to be done had troubled him sorely; for to ask his father was out of the question—how could a man be asked to subsidize a course of which, for all his kindness, he profoundly disapproved?

“Surely we only need a very little to take us to London?” she urged him. “I have some jewellery: we can sell that. And when we are in town you can paint your pictures and sell them—*ay*. Lionel, we shall be quite rich!”

Yes, it might be all right, if they were once to get there; he could depend, if not on his skill, on the name and, he thought shamefacedly, on the title which seemed so ill-fitting to an insignificant person like himself to bring him commissions from snobs. But Orabella? But his word to Pallas?

He knew, however, that to veto Marfa Pia’s suggestion outright would inevitably be to rouse her doubts of his sincerity; she was watching him with her great, sensitive eyes while her hands clung to the open fronts of his coat.

“If I can think of no better way, that is what we must do,” he told her gravely. “No, I won’t use your jewellery, which may represent our only capital! Nor do I want, if it can possibly be avoided, to begin our lives together under a burden of debt. Give me but a little while, and I’ll find a solution; I’ll find some kind of securities——”

“A little while? But you haven’t understood me. I want us to go now—at once—before I am missed at home. I have Carrie with me—she is a fool, she will do anything for a piece of ribbon or a trinket; I have promised her the green beads you brought me last week—you will get me some more, won’t you? And I have left word that I am gone to the shoemaker’s for a fitting; that gives us at least two hours before they begin to wonder where I am——”

It was no use; he prisoned her hands more tenderly to tell her.

“My dear love, I have to go to Paragon. I can’t have my little nephew buried and not make this last act of love and respect for his memory.”

“You go to my enemies!” she flung at him.

“Perry was not your enemy; my sister-in-law Aurora is too gentle and too sweet to be anybody’s enemy. She is the only person to whom I ever speak of you; she is kind and understanding, and I think she might be our friend. Dearest, I couldn’t hurt her by not going to the funeral; besides, Aunt Pallas has asked me to stand for her, since it is impossible for her to make the journey to Paragon, with all the responsibilities she has on her hands.”

She scowled, she charged him with unfaithfulness—but in her heart she understood, no less than he, the weight of these family obligations, of which even more was made in Cuba than in England. She had come on impulse, determined to enforce her test of his affection, but she had too much common

sense to carry her resentment to an extreme on finding that it failed; she contented herself with dragging from him the promise that they should elope immediately on his return from Paragon; which Lionel gave her with a heavy heart. She was triumphant as she and Carrie ran back, and in by the back door of the shoemaker's, outside whose front Joseph waited with the limitless patience of his race.

IV

Peregrine's funeral was a very pompous one, as became a very important little boy. Sax relations from four counties attended, and the marchioness had ample support of tearful connections by marriage when the *cortège* set forth from the gates of the Hall. The tears were conventional; every one knew that poor little Perry was better gone; but Orabella Sax—few people now remembered the Burmester—in her crêpes, her pearls, and her panoply of fashionable mourning, that turned her small, erect figure into a monument of grandmotherly bereavement, commanded grief, as she commanded respect, by the dignity of her bearing. It was generally agreed that she was a much more impressive figure than the pale young mother, whose dry-eyed stillness embarrassed every one who attempted to condole with her. The only absentee from the notable gathering was William, whose regiment had been ordered abroad only twenty-four hours before Perry's funeral took place.

Orabella sat dabbing her eyes and wondering if Lionel would come back and speak to her after the burial; she would never ask him. Lord Mildenhall, alone of the male members of the family, had not gone to the cemetery; he, poor soul, was afflicted with gout—a strange ailment for so abstemious a creature to suffer from, but he paid the penalty of a line of riotous ancestors. Surely Lionel would not return to Bristol without seeing his father?

There was also present a pretty young Sax cousin whom Orabella had long held mentally in reserve for her youngest son. Since Lionel must undoubtedly marry, it was well to have in hand a gentle, biddable creature with an almost exaggerated reverence for her probable mother-in-law. Orabella looked with reflective approval at little Lady Sarah Sax. Would it be possible, on so melancholy an occasion, to draw the girl aside and speak a few words of warning and encouragement in her ear? Listless and delicate as she seemed—but without question modest—she would surely bestir herself for the salvation of a favourite cousin?

How pale Lionel was, and thin, and worried-looking. He had perhaps begun to regret . . . She must sink her resentment, and try once more to win him back to the family fold. If he returned with the others from the cemetery, it would surely be a good sign?

Her heart leapt in her bosom when Lionel came in with some of the relations. He and Beaufort had ignored each other's existence even at the tomb. Beaufort came later, with the Bishop of Bath, who had conducted the ceremony; he—Beaufort—was uneasy about his father's illness. He had no desire to be precipitated into his inheritance at a moment fatal for his diplomatic prospects. So far as he was concerned, Paragon would be a liability rather than an asset—unless he could come to some agreement with William, who

was little likely to give up his rollicking in the officers' mess for the dubious pleasures of squirearchy.

Lionel went up to see Lord Mildenhall after a few words, constrained on either side, with his mother. For all his love, he found it hard to forgive her that interview with María Pía, of which the latter, reluctantly, had told him; to his sister-in-law Caroline he would not speak. Only his affection for Aurora, his knowledge of how hurt she would be if he neglected to pay this last tribute to his little nephew, brought him to the house to-day: a house he no longer chose to regard as home, since it rejected the girl he loved.

He sat down beside his father's chair, thinking how old and fragile Lord Mildenhall had come to appear. The helpless leg was propped up in its bandages like a monstrous cocoon, while its owner endeavoured to cool his fevers by application to his favourite Descartes. After they had talked a little:

"Have you any plans for the future, my dear?" Lord Mildenhall asked; he spoke gently, even wistfully, and Lionel felt his own heart aching for the pain he was causing his father.

"Do you mean immediate or prospective, Papa?" He tried to evade the issue.

"Both." The kind, tired eyes were fixed on his. Giving up evasion, Lionel dropped his head into his hands.

"Nothing that is definite. The turn events have taken has, to some extent, shifted the initiative out of my hands. Now that her grandfather has returned, it would seem her duty—would it not?—to wait until he is sufficiently recovered to ask him for her hand. I do not see what else, in honour, I can do."

"Nor I, my dear." Lord Mildenhall sighed. He waited a little. "And if he refuses?"

"Do you think it is likely?" Lionel's startled look showed that he had never seriously contemplated this possibility.

"Impossible to tell. From the point of view of a Bristol man, it is to be feared"—Lord Mildenhall's lips twisted into a painful smile—"you have not very much to offer!" A caress took the sting out of the words. "Have you never heard the saying, 'Money talks, in Bristol'?"

"Did it talk when you married Mama? Or did the title drown its voice?" asked Lionel, with unwonted bitterness.

His father shook his head.

"Your grandfather was a remarkable man; in his way, a great gentleman. I had more respect for him, in a way, than I had for my own father, and I am sorry he did not live long enough for you to appreciate his qualities. Neither money nor title would have won me your mother unless he had believed in our love for each other. Your aunt Pallas had broken his heart, and he had reached a conclusion that is held, as a rule, only by the very young or the very old: that love is all." He reached out and laid his hand for a moment over his son's. "Perhaps I am not yet old enough; for I have not reached that conclusion, Lionel."

"And I am not yet old enough to have lost it." Lionel spoke sharply, though he smiled.

"It is as it should be, my dear," his father conceded.

"Then you support me in my intention of marrying María Pía?" he cried.

"How can I support you?" Lord Mildenhall made a despairing gesture. "You know I have every reason for deploring it; you do not expect me to welcome the wreckage of your mother's peace of mind? That, may God forgive me, weighs more than all the rest; more than your marriage with a Catholic, which will break a long and prized tradition of our house. We have maintained our Protestant solidarity since the reign of Cromwell, Lionel, and you will be the first to break it."

"But I am not becoming a Catholic, Papa——"

"Don't forget, your children will be Catholics; unless you make that concession, she will not be allowed to marry you. There will be Catholic Saxons for the first time in the history of our line. How will you provide for them, my son?—for they can inherit none of our estate. Your own inheritance is a very small one, and I shall be able to do very little to help you. Whatever I leave—apart from William's share—must go to Beaufort. I fear you will not be able to depend on your brothers, after I am gone."

"I'd rather starve than ask them!"

"And let her—and perhaps your children—starve too?"

"I do not see there need be question of starvation, Papa," was the sober answer. "I've realized, of course, that Matthew Flood's return must gravely affect María Pia's position: that she may have, apart from his generosity—a problematical factor—no more than I to live upon. Still, that need not plunge us—as Mama fears, and as I see you fear as well—into squalor!" He made one of those confiding gestures that had endeared him to his father in his childhood. "I will tell you what my plans are—so far as I've been able to make any. I am not, really, now, so bad a painter! And I see no reason why I should not, in London, earn my living by my brush. I have plenty of friends who, I'm sure, would give me commissions, and I shouldn't take advantage of friendship to ask grand prices! We should have to live, of course, in a very humble fashion——"

Lord Mildenhall thought, "It will kill your mother," but he had not the heart to shatter the optimism which spoke in Lionel's quiet, considered words.

"We should not attempt, of course, to move in any sort of society save that of the artists to whose community I hope to belong."

"Will that satisfy your wife? Is a young and beautiful woman, accustomed to the gaiety of foreign society, likely to take kindly to the circles of Bohemia?"

"I think its novelty may please her for a while; by the time that has worn off we may be in a better position. At least, she is likely, among artists, to meet people of education, who can speak to her in a language she understands."

"And her own family? Her life in Cuba? Are you leaving these entirely out of your calculations?"

"It is by her own wishes that we leave them out. She has told me very little," admitted Lionel, "but from what she says it appears that her father's second marriage has wounded her very deeply; if we were to go to Cuba, she says she would not desire to return to her own home."

They talked for a little longer, and when Lionel rose to go he lingered for a moment with his hand on his father's shoulder.

"There is one thing for which I should like to thank you."

"What is it, my dear?"

"That you have not once, in all our conversation, made reference to María Pía's heredity."

There was a long silence; Lord Mildenhall sat staring into the fire, his chin sunk upon his breast.

"Do you wish me to refer to it?"

"I am grateful you should ask me; and I should like to feel that there is nothing you and I cannot speak of together."

The elder man opened his lips as if to speak, and closed them again, shaking his head.

"If I were sufficiently sure of my own wisdom, I might have something to say. I do not wish to increase your difficulties; I would relieve them if I could. That of which you speak lies between you and her. Had you, instead of Beaufort, been my heir, I should have had no choice but to mention it."

"Yes; I have realized that there's Beaufort and William between me and the marquise."

"And if there had not been?" Lord Mildenhall's eyes met those of his son, and for the first time Lionel flinched from that kind regard.

"I would not impugn your sensibility by suggesting that you have not already weighed all of the possible consequences. . . . God bless you, Lionel!"

As he reached the door his father called after him:

"Do you return to Bristol to-night?"

"It was my intention." He would not say that nothing would induce him to spend a night under a roof where María Pía was not received.

"A pity. Your mother will be disappointed."

He stood silent.

"Was there anything that you wanted, Papa?" It cost him an effort to say it; all his mind was set on getting back to Bristol, for, in his brief absences, he never ceased to be tormented about the safety of María Pía, although she had given him her word never again to ride alone.

"I was to have gone to Bath to-morrow; still, if it is not a convenience to you——"

"What is it?" Lionel's heart sank, yet, in very gratitude for his father's kindness, he could not ignore the tentative proposal.

Lord Mildenhall explained a long and tedious matter of business in which he was at present engaged with his old friend Lord Swanage—himself too old and too crippled by the ailments that had taken him to Bath to undertake the further journey to Paragon.

"You may have to go and sit up to your ears in mud to get a listening!—but it would pay you," said Lord Mildenhall, with a glint of humour in his eye. "Are you a good enough business man to put up with this trifling sacrifice of your *amour-propre*, think you?"

"I doubt my ability in matters of business," said Lionel truthfully, "and I think Beaufort might do it better—though I don't see Beau sacrificing a new coiffure (have you observed it, by the way?—the most unbecoming, fashionable freak our Beau has ventured yet) to the steam of the baths."

"Beaufort is no favourite with Swanage," was the short answer. "You have always been in his good graces—which is more than you deserve, considering the way you've lampooned him with your pencil."

"Oh, that was in my Hogarth period!—and luckily he never recognized himself. Well, if you think I can deputize for you successfully——"

"Do not hasten the matter," counselled Lord Mildenhall. "If you can amuse him a little, and make him forget his aches and pains, you will have better chance of succeeding in your mission than if you rush it like a bull charging a gate. Come to me in the morning for your expenses——"

It had been on the tip of Lionel's tongue to say that he could not possibly afford to linger in Bath for more than twenty-four hours; but to do so seemed so ungracious that he was constrained to accept his father's directions—all save the last.

"I think, sir, I had better leave to-night; there is a bright moon, and it will give me a clear day for my overtures to Lord Swanage."

Again their eyes met, and each knew what lay in the other's heart.

Orabella lifted her head and turned it quickly away as Lionel came back to the drawing-room. Seemingly preoccupied, she took note of his every movement as he went from group to group of the company, which now—Aurora having withdrawn—relaxed a little, and seemed disposed to make the most of a family reunion. After all, one could not mourn much for Perry: he was such a very little boy.

Old Lady Augusta Sax, with whom Lionel was a great favourite, rapped him on the arm with her fan and demanded, in her shriek like a poll-parrot, when he was coming to London. "Your brothers were never such stay-at-homes!—and every miss in town is pestering me with inquiries. Now I hope you haven't been getting caught up with some local milkmaid, and forgetting your duties to your own class!"

The old woman's vulgarities were too well known to evoke more than a titter among those who overheard her; but Orabella held her breath as she went on:

"It's high time you were getting married; do you want to miss every pretty creature of your own generation? You'd better make haste, or you'll find only the left-overs, and fall to the net of some woman three times your age. . . ."

"Still he makes no answer!" thought Orabella, her ears tingling. "Perhaps he knows I am listening."

Beaufort was coming in for a great deal of attention—as though he were already the head of the family. She resented that. Beaufort—in Edward's place! She stifled a little cry with the tips of her fingers. Whichever of her family went from her, she could never, never live without Edward. She looked round suddenly, piteously, for Lionel: the only one with enough imagination to guess what she was feeling; and he was talking to little Lady Sarah, who—stupid girl!—was hanging her head and murmuring instead of flashing those glances which Orabella knew, from her rich experience, imprint themselves on a young man's memory, be he ever so heavily committed. She could have slapped Sarah. Beaufort, characteristically, was paying assiduous attention to the more important of their guests.

He was bending over the back of her chair; she felt the light brush of his lips on her cheek.

"Good-night, Mama dear."

Sickness and faintness rushed over her, but she controlled them to say coldly:

"You are going?"

"Yes. Good-night—and God bless you, Mama."

Descartes tumbled from Lord Mildenhall's hand; he woke with a start from the doze into which he had fallen, as his wife burst into the room.

"Edward—he has gone!"

"Gone?" Her appearance perturbed him more than her words; she was haggard, broken

"Lionel has gone." From her intonation he might have been dead.

"Yes, my love; to Bath."

"Bath?" Her voice trembled between incredulity and relief.

He explained.

An hour later the stairs and galleries of Paragon twinkled with the candles of retiring guests; pages dashed from room to room with warming-pans, valets and ladies' maids started the long ritual of putting their employers to bed.

She had not been to Beaufort's room since he was a boy, and now she hesitated at the door, and her faint rap was as though she were keeping some unhallowed assignation. He opened it, and his face in the candle-light looked as though it were carved out of old wood.

"Mama! Pray come in." He took pains to show no astonishment. He closed the door behind her, while she stood biting her lips and twisting her fingers, like a foolish girl betrayed into a compromising situation.

"Pray, Mama, be seated." He offered her a chair.

Words burst from her.

"Beaufort—get rid of the girl! Only you can do it!"

A pistol shot would have startled him less, yet he gave no sign. Raising the snuffers, he clipped a smoking wick with elegance; his impassivity terrified her.

"Don't pretend to misunderstand me! I know—I know it all. What you do is your own affair—only—if your mother's peace of mind means anything to you—take her away—when you go back to London!"

"You are *énervée*, Mama." His cold hand pressed her back into the chair, where she broke into a wild weeping. "It is but to be expected, after your exhausting day." With his movement like a leopard he crossed the room, poured out wine and brought it to her. "Drink this, and then let me take you to your room."

She was so weak, so shattered, that she accepted his ministrations. She hung on his arm like an old woman as he led her down the long gallery to her own apartments. She had not courage to add another word to those she had already spoken, of whose import—and its effect—she was already afraid.

Her fear was not abated when he bent to kiss her hand at parting; when he raised his head, still bending, so that his eyes were on a level with hers, and she saw, with a gasp of horror, the devil behind them. To what monster had she given birth?

With a sob Lady Mildenhall darted into her room, dismissed her maid and flung herself on her knees beside the bed.

"O God, what have I said? What have I done? But Thou knowest, O God, it was not for myself. . . ."

CHAPTER XVII

I

THE town of Bath, packed for its season, offered small attraction to Lionel, though he met at every turn London acquaintances who professed delight in renewing his acquaintance. It was not long before he came to suspect what was actually the truth—that in the letter from his father which he had delivered to Lord Swanage, the former had exhorted his old friend to use any means at his disposal to detain the messenger at his side.

It seemed hopeless to bring the old man up to the discussion of matters of business; when the noble lord was not steeped to his neck in mud—a situation in which, to Lionel's relief, he did not demand his junior's company—he was in the card room, in the Pump room, or frequenting the society of the many ladies for whom he had a senile fancy. When Lionel hesitantly brought up the subject of his visit, Lord Swanage pooh-poohed it: "Plenty of time for that, my boy! Bath, in November—lud, ye should be gatherin' rosebuds, not hagglin' over miserable bricks and mortar!" He leered, as he button-holed the reluctant Lionel and drew him aside. "Here's four score o' the prettiest fashionable women in town, and a dozen at least o' fortunes; why don't you try to improve your condition?"

Digging Lionel in the waistcoat, dribbling with modish scandal, the old reprobate would drag his companion away, to Lady Melissa's toilette, to take chocolate with the young Duchess of Blandish, to advise the débutante daughters of the Countess of Forth on their costumes for the *bal masqué*—"An artist's opinion, ladies! You may safely leave your credit in the hands of my young friend Sax—who, if you smile sweetly enough, will paint your portraits into the bargain!"

He would not have been young, healthy and sensitive to beauty if the silvery elegance of Bath had not appealed to him, with its suave architecture, its fashionable and cultivated population, which afforded such a contrast to the rough Bristol society, to the poverty, squalor and savagery of which, latterly, he had seen so much. Bath was another world, a world of aristocracy and aristocratic manners; the rigid formality which governed the Pump room extended its authority throughout the town; behaviour was even more stylized than in London, clothing as rich and varied as any to be seen at court. It was agreeable to meet people who spoke one's own language, to rub shoulders with the culture which Lionel had missed since leaving Paragon, not to have one's heart torn by the spectacle of the beggars and mutilated horrors who, although no doubt they existed, were kept out of the way of the fashionable visitors, in the back alleys where they belonged.

On this class of society, at least, the wars had not left their stamp, although there were murmurs that the tremendous increase in the prices of luxury commodities and the troubles in France made it almost impossible to keep up a standard equal to that on which Mr. Nash, very rightly, insisted. No struggle, however, was apparent on the fair, painted faces which crowded

about Lionel; there was no visible anxiety among the young gentlemen who flung their guineas so lavishly upon the card tables.

Lionel did not care for cards, nor could he afford to play. He would, in spite of his duty to his father, have thrown up the whole exploit, had not a means presented itself of making a little of the money of which he stood in so much need. His pencil sketch of Lord Swanage, done only to while the time while the old gentleman gossiped with his cronies over their waters, created quite a furore: a dozen ladies, a dozen gentlemen desirous of securing souvenirs of their inamoratas, clamoured for his services; a portrait by Lord Lionel Sax bade fair to be the sensation of that particular season.

It created a delicate situation, for none of these ladies and gentlemen expected to pay for the favour; Lionel was "one of themselves," and one did not take money from one's equals, except across the card tables. He was obliged, at last, to take one or two into his confidence, explaining that painting, for him, was not an elegant hobby, but a profession: which earned him ribald laughter and some sneers. A few of the inquirers sheered off; they would lose a hundred guineas without batting an eyelash at the tables, but had no money to waste on portraits by one who, despite his breeding, had no sort of reputation as an artist. Others, however, held to the bargain: while allowing their shock to be apparent—surely questions of money were in the worst taste between people of quality?—they agreed, with raised eyebrows, to the modest price Lionel put on his work. He had a facility for quick, pencil likeness, and at least he had not to bore his subjects with long sittings. At first he felt crucified with embarrassment, but when he had conquered it a little, he began to enjoy the work; he enjoyed still more the knowledge that he was laying a foundation for his and María Pía's future; he glowed at the prospect of taking back to her tangible proof of his ability to care for and support her. The future seemed very roseate to this young lover, executing his—let us admit it—not very good little portraits, while his heart was in Bristol, and he continued to school his soul in patience for his father's sake. He wrote to her, explaining fully the reason for his delay; he begged her to have confidence in, and patience with him. He wrote to her every day, and sent the letters by carrier; hers came back, stiff, formally phrased, for, apart from her lack of practice in letter-writing, she was obliged to write them in French—with occasional, misspelt excursions into the English in which, she complained, she had quite ceased to make progress, since he was no longer at hand to encourage her.

Lord Swanage wrote to Lord Mildenhall:

"You can have the price you want for your property, though I suppose I shall have to go to the Jews for it. Your boy is still here, causing great strife among the ladies—of which it seems he is unaware; but I doubt I shall hold him much longer, so if 'tis a matter of an entanglement, I warn you to be prepared for his return."

That return would not have been postponed for an hour if Lionel had known that Beaufort was still at Paragon.

Due to return to town the day after the funeral, his plans had been upset by the recurrence of an ailment which had plagued him from his childhood:

a humiliating and vulgar upheaval of the digestive organs which prostrated him, racked him and voided him over a space, sometimes, of thirty-six hours. He had had several attacks in Spain, so violent that they resembled poisoning; it was, in fact, a form of dysentery, and its symptoms, on this occasion, were exaggerated by a surfeit of oysters, in which he had indulged on the night following the funeral.

Beaufort, in fact, was abominably ill; his mother tended him, concealing the revulsion she felt—not of illness, for Orabella had seen plenty in her time, and was nearly as efficient in the sick-room as Pallas; but the shame of her own conduct was upon her, and she had prayed for Beaufort's speedy departure—as though this would take her shame from her. She did not want to speak to or see Beaufort again until it was all over. What "it" was she did not dare to specify, even in her own mind.

II

"Since you are well, perhaps we can talk a little?"

Matthew raised his head doubtfully.

"Talk. I had forgotten about talking. Of course . . . There is much to be said. It would take days, months, years, to say it. And who would profit? Only myself; and I have no need to speak it aloud; it is all here—locked *here*"—he struck his chest with his clenched hand. "Let all that go, don't you see—I have got to get away from it? Back, back into this"—he pointed to the room about them. "Walls—with hangings on them; windows—with glass in them; a floor that isn't fouled—a hundred objects whose shape and use I had forgotten: these are in my eyes, every time I open them—and curdling in my brain." He lifted his shoulders and laughed shortly. "This morning—talking to Clay: phrases that once meant much, and now mean nothing—and a look in Clay's eyes: yes, I knew what that meant. *The poor devil is simple.*"

"I should not have let you over-rule me; I felt it was too early . . . Only think of the great progress you have made in the last few weeks; go slowly, and have patience. It will all come back."

He shook his head.

"Not here. Nothing comes here. At Triton. I must get back to Triton, to find"—this time his eyes creased in a smile—"to find Matthew Flood! I don't delude myself that the discovery will be a pleasant one, but it has to be made."

"That goes without saying: but it will be some time before you are fit to leave this house—to take on yourself the responsibilities of independence." Her speech halted before the concentrated darkness of his gaze.

"Ma'am, I am much obliged to you for your solicitude! I know I owe you more than thanks, and it may be that, among other things, I shall one day find means of repayment. But you must not try to control me!"

"I should indeed know better than that," she murmured. "Having marked certain changes, I had perhaps assumed too much! When"—she put the question with deliberate bluntness—"when do you leave my house for Triton?"

"I will leave it to-day."

She gasped.

"That at least is impossible! The weather's damp and raw, no fires are lighted, the rooms haven't been aired since Maria's departure. Come, you must not be headstrong," she said briskly. "Give the servants proper notice, and no doubt they will do their best. Matthew, if you are well enough to talk of going, you are well enough to talk of other things."

"Of what things? Pally, don't plague me with the past!" he broke out. "Who can alter that? I must get my hands"—he held them out, and it seemed to her that they had a broken beauty, as of something cruelly misused—"I must get my hands on the future! Tom Shergill—dead; Jack Peddy—dead; Fordyce—his pills and potions couldn't save him, when it came to the last. Death found 'em—each one of them—in their beds; easy killing. Pally Burmester . . . why are you and I alive?"

He had turned sideways in the chair, one knee slung across the other, his chin dropped on his arms, which were crossed on the chair back. She answered him:

"You, at least, have no need to ask that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she told him—and stammered a little—"I m-mean—Maria." She added, as he was silent: "What do you do with Maria when you go back to Triton? Do you take her with you?"

"If the wench chooses to come. There is at least that much of my blood in her! She refuses to be driven."

"Ah—you handled her badly! She is gentle enough with those who try to lead, and not to drive her."

"You forget; I have seen this nature before—a nature which, when thwarted, turns to sullenness and evil temper: the nature of the ungoverned savage, which she has inherited through her mother. Very well; I will, if you please, take responsibility for it; but I am not to be troubled with it—again. If young madam chooses to mend her ways, I will take her back with me, for the present; let her give trouble, and she shall be packed back to Cuba, from which," he added bitterly, "it is, in my opinion, a thousand pities she was ever permitted to depart."

"Have you no feeling, Matthew," she murmured, "for one who is dependent on you in the utmost degree one human being can be dependent on another; to whom her right to your protection means nothing, unless that protection is freely given?—one who seeks tenderness without knowing it, and understanding because she cannot understand herself? Such understanding is yours, and only yours, to give. For her pride is your pride, and her good and evil are yours, Matthew—as she is your living image! She is shy, is she not? Defensive? And on her guard? My poor Maria——!"

"What you call shyness, ma'am, I have put down as insolence. It's evident the girl takes no more pleasure in my company than I do in hers."

"Do you wonder? What pains have you taken to make it agreeable to her?" she asked indignantly.

"What do you expect me to do? Lay myself out to amuse her, as one amuses young ladies in drawing-rooms? I've forgotten the art—nor, if I remembered, would I choose to exercise it again. It is not for that I have

come back—my God! Or do you and she expect me to play the contrite grandfather? Contrition I may feel, but it is my own affair, and is not to be exploited for the satisfaction of an impudent chit——”

“Oh, why are you so bitter?” she whispered.

“*You* ask me that?”

“For the love of heaven, let us forget all this ‘you’ and ‘me’: let us forget Sheba, and María Cayetuña—and even María Pía herself, so far as she is part of those others. Let us see only a child who is unhappy—oh, no young creature has a right to be so unhappy as María is! I have done what I can—but God himself can’t alter the past.”

“Can I?” he stared at her coldly. “Ma’am, have you no reason? What do you expect of me when, in looking upon this creature, I look on my ruin? Isn’t it enough to carry one’s ruin about, inside one?” He smote his brow. “I’ve sinned, I’ve accepted the judgment of God; am I to be judged by my own seed? Ma’am—you know it is the law that no man can be tried twice for the same offence.”

“Who is trying you?” Alarmed by his violence, she spoke very gently.

“What do you think are my feelings,” he went on presently, when he had mopped away the sweat which, partly from weakness, partly from emotion, rolled from the roots of his hair, “when she cries out her pretensions to the house of which I once thought to make you the mistress?”

“Ah—no!” she cried, lifting her hand as though to put the thought aside. “If I feel none of that, why should you?” She laid both her hands on his arm. “Dear Matthew, put away the past! At least don’t let it touch your relationship with María. You can be so very kind, and I cannot tell you how that poor child needs your kindness.”

He peered at her as though his sight were dim.

“Do you plead for her?”

“Indeed I do. And it should not be needful,” she told him stoutly.

“What can I do? What means have I of doing anything?”

“I hoped she would tell you all herself, but now I have seen your attitude, I understand why she has not done so. Yes; I know these last few days she has been sullen and silent, even with me; there is good reason for it. . . . Have patience with me, Matthew; I must start at the beginning, or you will never understand.”

III

“I can’t see it I must have spectacles.” She had taken the letter out of the deep pocket of her skirt and offered it to him. “Pallas! This is the second time I have arrived in Bristol penniless. Who will give me credit for a pair of spectacles?”

She read it to him.

“Honoured and Beloved Aunt,

“I trust and pray that all goes well with you, and with my Beloved I cannot tell you what anguish I endure at the thought of you and she being exposed to the machinations of Evil persons, and with what impatience I

continue to perform my duty here. For procrastination and uncertainty I never met any one like my lord of Swanage, and were it not that Papa has reposed this confidence in me, and I am unable to betray his trust, I would be back post haste, faster than this letter will travel. . . . Pray use your influence, dear Aunt, to persuade María Pía of the reluctance with which I remain thus separated from her, and to assure her of the usefulness to us both, later, of being in Lord Swanage's good graces: for on his return to town, his lordship has promised to put more work in my way.

"I hope Mr. Flood's recovery goes on apace, for my first object on my return is to ask him for María Pía's hand . . ."

She halted; Matthew was staring into the fire. He turned his head as her voice sank into silence.

"Well?"

"Ah, Matthew! It seems that, either way, we stand to break hearts."

They had been talking for more than two hours, and both were exhausted; but Pallas knew that her battle was won: the battle which María Pía, by her impetuosity and sudden flaming resentment, had almost flung away. Flood pride, which once had broken her, was now her ally: pride which would not suffer patronage from superiors, nor brook humiliation from any outside quarter. She had seen the blood creep purple round his eyes, and felt the resentment that followed her description of Beaufort's conduct: the resentment of one who receives an insult in his blood—yes: that was what Sheba's granddaughter had become since Pallas's recital. *His blood*. Though he had not by word or sign admitted it.

A sudden shaft of doubt ran through her: had they, two old people with their lives behind them, the right to interfere with the two young creatures whose lives were in the making?—who must go through their discipline of tears, as their elders had done before them? But this—this, surely, went beyond tears! She saw Edward, tall, grey, with the sadness of resignation graven into his good, noble face; and she saw Orry—with all the laughter and frivolity quenched for ever in a puzzled bewilderment, that life could be so cruel. She saw farther . . . and what she saw made her throw up her hands with a cry of which she was unconscious, and bury her face, to hide her bitter tears.

When at last she looked up, ashamed that he should have seen her surrender, Matthew was by the window. The curtains were undrawn, for Joseph, who had come in to close them, was dismissed by a shake of his mistress's head; and a few stars shone through the meshes of the leafless trees. He stood there, looking out, with his hands clasped behind him; the massive shoulders were bent, the head no longer came level with the fringe of the helmet, but that attitude was as familiar to her as though she had been watching it every day of her life. She caught her breath: *could* time roll back? Then, as by chance, her glance fell to her own hands, to their delicate withering, the over-darkness of the veins; and she blushed for her folly.

"How different the pattern of life is, from that which we draw in our minds!" Matthew was saying. "We choose our materials, we make our design, and always there is something we have forgotten that alters the whole.

"Over there"—he pointed into the noiseless dark—"lies Triton; to whom

does it belong? That is one of the problems to which no answer may ever be found, this side eternity!"

She must be realistic, she told herself sharply, and not surrender herself to dreams.

"You do not know what line Santiago de Lorcha will take when he hears of your return."

He turned his head, smiling faintly.

"I know what line any Cuban is likely to take. My—son-in-law"—the word was so strange, he lingered upon it—"will avail himself to the utmost of the difficulties of communication between his island and ours, and by the time a decision is reached I shall be in the Redcliff yard. Nay, Pally, I will not go to law; what good can come of it? From what Clay says, enough has already been squandered in legal quibbling."

"Matthew, do you seek to recover—?"

"I seek to recover nothing," he told her, "beyond a pittance on which I can live, and hold myself independent of charity. At my age, what use has a person for money? I want none of its damning shackles round me while I prepare myself for eternity, Pallas!" He laughed, but the bitterness was gone from his laughter. He came back and drew his chair close to her side. "Why do you look at me so?"

"A fortnight ago," she stammered, "you were so weak that a little conversation wearied you; it is like you to command your strength as you once commanded your actions! Even now, I find it hard to believe it is you, sitting beside me—so familiar, and yet a stranger; a ghost that has put on flesh—yes, I feel sometimes I am talking to a ghost. . . ."

"I try sometimes to work out the problem of the future: the problem of a man who has come back, and is not wanted—nay, let me speak: of one whose return brings confusion into a score of lives. On this I do not dwell. I have work to do—and this, which you have shown me, this is to be done as well: I had not counted on a young woman whose blood is my blood, and whose affairs must, it seems, be mine as well. But there is other work: I will tell you. I have known it for a long time.

"First there must be a clearance. A beggar cannot do what I am come back to do—and what am I but a beggar in a place like Triton? I cannot sell it, even if it is mine, because of the entail; which of my cousins survives, I wonder, to inherit it? But I can sell its contents. There is a fortune under those eaves—a fortune which has piled itself up for more than two centuries: that my ancestors haggled and fought and pilfered out of their rivals—I suppose it is not a great fortune, for value lies with the buyer, not with him who has goods to sell. Such as it is, its sale will support me for whatever more of time remains."

"That makes me feel sad," said Pallas, as he paused. "It is foolish, I know, to be sentimental over possessions, and yet"—she glanced round the room—"I cannot help thinking how sad it would make me to part with these things. They are not, I know, nearly as fine as the things you have at Triton—although I suppose they have a certain value of their own, yet to me they have a kind of beauty which, I suppose, is mostly tradition. I should hate to lose that cabinet, with its china, because it belonged to Mama's family, who had kept it for more than a century; and those tortoiseshell

caddies were given to my Quaker grandmother by a lady-in-waiting on Queen Anne; it's said they came from St James's Palace. One cannot help loving these things."

"Loving?" He smiled; he leaned forward, his hands clasped, hanging loosely between his knees. "Once we thought, you and I, we knew what loving was: do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember." Nothing mattered any more; she had closed her eyes.

"Shall I tell you what love is, Pallas? Love is Christ stretched on the Cross, it is the bleeding side of Jesus, His hands pierced with nails. It is the crown of thorns and the vinegar and hyssop. Love is hunger and thirst in the wilderness, the spittle of the mob, the scourge and the chain, the hotness of hell and the cold of the tomb. Listen: love's an old woman, bargaining with a crucifix in her hand; it's a black girl dying because someone put a white cock's feather in her bed; it's fever in the desert and dungeons of stone and labour under the lash. Those are the ways of love, God's love, that bring men to the Cross in the end."

"Matthew, have you become a Catholic?"

He shook his head.

"You need not be a Catholic to find out the truth," he told her. "Truth's bitter, and it's ugly, but it's like a purge—it drives out poison, if you steel yourself to swallow it. 'From the tangle of our loves and our lusts, deliver us, O Lord, and we shall praise Thee in our mortified flesh'—that came to me in the dark. It is not stone nor iron that make a man a prisoner, Pallas; it's the dark web of his sins.

"They say that God is in the sun: but if you find Him in the stinking dark—what then? If you ask for death, and death comes and plays a cat-and-mouse game with you, and you watch others die and your turn never comes—what then? When time is not, when sight and hearing, smell and taste fade away, and even your flesh hardly records its various tortures, and still death does not come—there must be some reason for it, Pallas! I do not remember when the knowledge came to me, that I was not meant to die: that I had not earned that sweet quittance that came to me sometimes in dreams . . ."

The ash fell softly in the grate, and a descendant of Orabella's long-haired kitten stirred, bestowed a swift, casual lick on a fire-warmed flank, and subsided again into slumber.

"Then, Pallas, I saw the Cross. At first it was a single slit in the wall, no wider than a spear, no longer than the length of my two hands. It was all I had to tell me whether it was night or day; sometimes it glittered and burned, and that was noon: sometimes it was white, like ice, and I knew it was the time of the full moon. And one day—one day . . . My eyes were sore that day; they had kept me too long in the sun, and flies had bitten me all round the eyelids; they were swollen, I stumbled, I was almost blind. To be back in the cell was an unutterable relief. I could open my eyes only just a little. The slit was there—golden: I could hardly bear to look at it. I covered my eyes, and looked through my fingers; and there was another golden line, which crossed the first. To begin with, it was very faint and uncertain; it

came and went as I blinked my eyes. I thought it was an illusion: then—I was sure.

"The Cross: I could see it all the time, behind my eyeballs: often it was all I could see, when they left me in the dark for days at a time. Sometimes red, like fire, and sometimes so pale it was only just visible. Sometimes I was stretched on it: I could feel the drag of the nails in my hands and feet. And there was a voice—a voice which said, 'This is the love of God, to which all who have sinned and suffered much shall come in the end.' And then, Pallas—and then I knew there was indeed a God—the God whom I denied in my youth: a God whose will it was I should come back and witness."

"Matthew!"

"Nay, don't look at me as though there were something wonderful about me"—he made a movement of impatience. "To none but you can I speak of these things: but I have others to say. Yes, by God!—and they shall listen to me. For I've been a slave, Pallas—and I've come back to kill the slave trade: that is the message of the Cross, and the reason for the survival of Matthew Flood."

IV

Thirty-seven years ago, unshuttered windows and a blaze of candles had published the return of the master of Triton; torches had flamed in the Old Market and a cheering rabble had accompanied the triumphant horseman half-way up Brandon Hill. Hands were outstretched to welcome him across his own threshold, the popping of corks, the ringing of glasses had contributed to the heady excitement of that night when the kingdoms of the earth appeared to be his. What company of grey-headed ghosts awaited the Burmester coach, as, too familiar to draw attention, it went creaking up St. Michael's, with an old man and a sullen-faced girl inside?

A few ancient dependents, pensioners of Hercules, to whom had been communicated the news of Matthew's return, waited in a scurrying wind that blew grey locks across pinched faces, and raised a feeble cheer as the coach turned in between the stone monsters; a few "hospital" workers, released to lend some show of state to the occasion, bobbed curtseys which were acknowledged gravely: the raised hand, the slow, unsmiling nod were Hercules' gestures—on one of his "good" days. The thought flashed through Matthew's mind of the many times, down at the timber yard, he had seen his grandfather acknowledge the workmen's greetings, in the self-same fashion. He turned sharply to María Pia, and, before he had time to ponder the folly of the question, snapped out:

"Who's got the yard?"

She answered him, to his surprise, in her alien accent:

"Do you mean the timber yard? No one has got it. There is no yard. Houses are built on the top of it"

He gave her a grim look.

"So you have interested yourself so far in the fortunes of your house?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I could not interest myself very much. There was nobody to tell me anything."

"I suppose not. Well, there"—they were passing the "Peep"; he pointed, the broken balustrade not escaping his attention—"there was your great-great-grandfather's favourite spot. From there he used to watch our ships upon the river."

"Our ships? And what has become of them?"

"Who knows?" But he was not really listening. Time had rolled back; a little boy was trudging sturdily up the endless drive, and it was hard to imagine that there was no bulky figure, in a shabby bottle-green suit, waiting to growl a welcome from the head of his loaded table. It was hard to look up at those upper windows, and realize the emptiness that lay behind: no rebellious old tyrant, cursing his wrongful imprisonment. No grinning Africa to send running with messages to the old man's reprobate cronies: no Shergill, no Peddy, no Burmester, no Fordyce—all gone. Only ghosts, ghosts, ghosts . . .

The wind bent the trees, but did not stir the yellowed leaves, glued by their moisture to the steps and balustrades. The house waited, in its silent beauty, like a tomb.

The front door opened doubtfully; strange servants came out on the steps. Their manner was uncertain; it was obvious they did not know what to expect from a new master.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

THE darkness of the alien streets, of the faulty lighting, did not alarm her as she sped with burning cheeks down St. Michael's Hill. Tucked into her bosom was the long-awaited yet well-nigh incredible summons: *Dearest, I am back. Come.* She had snatched it at the back door from a messenger at whose face she did not trouble to look; it was not the usual carrier, and that, in itself, was enough to assure her that Lionel was back in Bristol.

On Christmas Steps she was accosted, a hand fumbled at her arm, she thrust it aside with a strange, absent impatience; the swinging open of a tavern door, that bathed her tall figure in an orange glow, signified nothing, nor did the shouts and chirruping of invitation that followed her. The dense, fulminating activity of a river-port after nightfall went on about her, itinerant hawkers shouted, scabby wenches yelled from their doorsteps, her feet slipped in offal, and twice she nearly stumbled over a drunken man prone in the gutter. But all this strangeness, separated by only a few hundred yards from the aristocratic quiet of her home, stimulated rather than alarmed her. It was all part of the excitement of escape.

When she reached the better-lighted regions of Broad Street she let the cape fly back and strode out boldly, enjoying the freedom of masculine attire: for she had put on the old suit of Matthew's—she chuckled to think of Lionel's praising her for her foresight. This sudden summons could mean one thing only: that they were leaving Bristol at once—and how much easier it would be for both if it seemed to be two young gentlemen setting forth on their journey rather than a man and a girl, an obvious eloping couple!

As she hastened into the short side street, one end of which opened into Queen Square, while the other ended on the quay, the dank, fish-laden smell of the waterfront assailed her nostrils. A few riding-lights bobbed uncertainly ahead, she could hear the lap of the water; as she stood outside the door of Lionel's lodging the restless darkness of the river was on her left, there was a creak of cordage and a rumble of men's voices. She raised her hand hurriedly and rapped on the door.

The person who opened it stared at her curiously, lifting the candle he carried in his hand. She stiffened as she saw it was a servant, whose face, at once stupid and discreet, was unfamiliar to her. He wore some kind of livery; was this one of the Paragon servants, whom Lionel had taken into his confidence?

"Will you please to step upstairs? My orders is to remain below."

Silently she held out her hand for the candle; he seemed an uncouth, unlikely servant for upper-class people—probably a groom, whose proper duty was to look after the horses. Why had not Lionel come down to meet her? Her mind, quick to invent reasons, found an explanation: he was probably packing hurriedly. She had brought nothing save, under the knotted neckcloth, the jewels that had survived the flight from Madrid.

As she turned the first bend of the stairs she saw above her a light and an open door—the door, she remembered, of the studio; she leapt towards it, stumbling with the quaking of her knees.

“Lionel!”

But the room was empty. While she still gasped with disappointment, she saw a lively fire and a table with wine and preparations for a repast. Her eyes turned from these with impatience—what need had they for food, whose only food was love?—to become aware of something unfamiliar in her surroundings: some curious emptiness that lent the room a different aspect from that which it had worn on her previous visit. It was then she noticed that all the drawings had gone from the walls.

For some reason their absence affected her more ominously than the absence of Lionel; or rather it increased the feeling of uneasiness which her eagerness had held at bay until it was impossible any longer to deny it. Again she found explanations: he had packed them to take them with him—and while her mind insisted upon this feasible theory, her eyes, dilating, fixed on the hearth, which she now noticed was heaped with black ash. She found herself moving towards it, found herself bending stiffly, picking up with a hand that seemed to move without her volition a charred sheet on whose singed extremity survived in strokes of sanguine part of a bosom, a shoulder, an arm; and while her brain strove against recognition, a quiet step crossed the threshold.

“... I was a fool,” said María Pía, “not to remember your writing is the same as Lionel’s.”

“Your foolishness is my good fortune.” How sick he looked!—disgustingly so; the skin of his face hung loosely, like yellowed leather, and the whites of his eyes were discoloured. “Will you not remove your cape?”

He spoke as calmly as though it were a purely conventional meeting, making no move to approach or touch her; he merely closed the door and leaned against it gently, arms and legs crossed, as though time, for them both, was no object. She dragged the cape tightly about her, outlining the thrust of her bosom; she was sharply conscious of the unseemliness of her attire. He thought: “There is no beauty about her; and yet I love her.” And there was something challenging and dangerous about the admission that made his blood race. “I have gone to much trouble,” he told her, “to secure your presence here to-night.”

“*Entonces*—?” she flung at him.

“You would rather we speak in Spanish? It will indeed give me much pleasure to do so, for it is a language that lends itself to our subject.” He continued, in her own language: “How long is it since I have seen you?—for it seems like eternity. Can we blot out eternity before dawn?” He could hear her quick breathing. “Are you afraid of me, *querida*? You were not afraid in Madrid; all those weeks in the coach between Valladolid and the coast you were not afraid. If my passion had been a plant from one of your Cuban balconies, you could have tended it no more sedulously!”

“There are plants which are beautiful but which hold deadly poison in their petals!”

“Did you discern the poison when you breathed on each bud to open it for your pleasure? There was no poison then—nor is there now, my Doña Sol, my Sun of Havana!” He laughed quietly. “Is it pleasant again to be speak-

ing the language of the sun, the language of lovers, the true and only language of the heart? We shall speak no other, I promise you; these crystal syllables shall be our bower, our retreat, our alcove, which we shall dedicate to oblivion of all but each other!" He tasted the delicate castellano as he spoke it; it was his favourite of the several languages of which he had the mastery, and the most apt for his purpose; he experienced in its rich hyperbole the foretaste of the sensuality which, for so long, he had promised himself. "Does the prospect not attract you?" He left the door, for he had no apprehension of her attempted flight; if she were to try any such folly she would be stopped at the foot of the stairs, but he was sure of two things: of her pride and of his own powers of persuasion. He went to sit by the fire, his long, lean body thrown carelessly on the bench, leaning on his elbow, his hand—thin and elegant as his father's—stretched out towards the flame: his fingers seemed to touch, to mould, to possess it. A faint smile was on his lips; he looked into the heart of the fire, as though its depths inspired the picture his words were creating. He knew himself for an artist in words; what was paint beside words—paint, a medium no woman could understand save when it flattered her?

He excelled himself that night. It was a pity for Beaufort that he had not a more appreciative audience, for he spread the cities of the earth at her feet.

"You will make me this, you will make me that; do you propose, señor, to make me your wife?"

He turned, smiling sleepily, as though intoxicated by his dream.

"Any man, if you will, can make you his wife. That which I offer you is within my power alone."

"Then, if I am good enough for all the rest, I am good enough to marry."

He leapt to his feet and came and stood over her; his eyes were points of yellow flame in his sallow face.

"Listen: I could love no wife as I could love a mistress—if she were you. What does a creature like you want with the commonplace of marriage? What have you in common with women who demand a wedding ring to give them importance in their own eyes and those of their own pitiful, petty circle? Great God in heaven! are you not above all these? If I sought to harness you to me by marriage bonds, I should honour you less than I do by bidding you to be mine without these cheap formalities which are for vulgar people. Be mine! But be mine in freedom, for I will never insult you by imposing on you the bondage of wifehood."

He saw her lips thicken and her eyes grow inky in their darkness, and remembered Caroline's description.

"If that is what you feel, 'tis a pity you sent your sister-in-law to me!"

He bit his lip; yes, that had been a diplomatic error. But it was not to be admitted.

"It was a misunderstanding; Caroline speaks but indifferent French—had I known it at the time, I would not have entrusted her with so delicate a mission."

"*Es una desvergonzada! Una marrana! Una puta!*" It was not, Beaufort reflected, the vocabulary for a diplomatist's wife, although it might be piquant from his mistress.

"I love Caroline as little as you do, and I would not have chosen her as my ambassadress save that it seemed to me that a woman's mind might devise some

way of presenting my case that should convince you at once of my sincerity and my determination. You knew that I loved you; I felt there was some cause for your hesitation in trusting to my devotion, and having found what I believed to be a solution of our problem——”

“You speak of that low creature, that clown, that *capitán* Hanson, as a solution——?”

“I had not then realized that your courage might be equal to that which I now propose,” he soothed her, and turned to the table. “Shall we not celebrate this occasion with some wine? You must pardon the absence of servants; that rough fellow whom you saw downstairs cannot wait on us, stinking of the stables!”

“And the woman of the house——?” María Pía was beginning—and caught her breath, realizing her mistake.

He arched his brows cynically.

“So you are already acquainted with the domestic arrangements of my brother’s *garçonnière*? I thought as much: and judged it well to spare both of us inconvenience by arranging we should have it to ourselves. It is fortunate the Bennetts have a taste for the theatre, and that there is a ‘grand performance’ at Jacob’s Well to-night! They have gone off in style, the good wife in her best tabinet, greatly elated at the prospect of patronizing her neighbours from the reserved tiers!” He spoke with an exaggerated lightness, pouring wine into the glass which he held out to her. She looked at him quickly, snatched it, and, flinging her head back, tilted its contents down her throat; he watched the movement of the muscle under the clear, golden-brown skin, and wanted to lay his hands on it; to force her neck back, and back again, to set his teeth into the soft, ripe flesh. No other woman had ever roused in him these savage impulses, which, in other men, he had despised.

“Well, what is it you propose?” Her voice held almost a masculine roughness as she leaned back a little to avoid his proximity; but it was not a movement of shrinking.

“That we leave—to-night,” he said, with equal brevity. His eyes held hers; she had to stiffen herself not to blink, not to wince from the sense of almost physical pressure his eyes put on her. There was to be no more fencing; this was battle, to the end.

“That we leave—and for where?” As though by accident, she allowed the cape to fall open; she let her weight drop on a corner of the table, one leg slung across it, her arms folded—an attitude Lionel might have taken. His eyes gulped the revelation of her limbs, thus insolently displayed.

“For London, and thence—where you will.”

“You pay me a compliment,” she said coolly, “in believing my courage to be equal to that!”

“Yet you were prepared to fly—with Lionel! Ah, no, you cannot deny it, in that garb. How were you going—on some hired hack, or pillion, like a farm wench, behind your lover? And what sort of fashion was either, for the señorita María Pía de Lorcha?” He sneered. “What folly, *adorada mía*! What means has my brother to maintain you in the style of which you are worthy? In what manner does he propose to support you? On whose company will he waste you? You know, as well as I, the answer to all that!”

She moistened her lips, and spoke in English.

"You are a clever man, señor Beaufort Sax! I have, I assure you, great admiration for your cleverness. But to be clever *enough*—that is something else. There is between us a *mal entiendo*. . . . Wait; I will speak English, because it is more becoming to our conversation. The castellano, as you have just said, is a language for lovers—and what has that to do with you or me?"

A flash lightened Beaufort's eye, for in all his long experience of women he had never met anything more piquant than this girl's defiance. How sweet would be victory in the end! But he was artist enough, even in his lust, to desire a surrender in preference to forcing a conquest. His fastidiousness balked at the hurly-burly of physical compulsion—though she might provoke him to that if she persisted too long in her refusal.

"You were right in granting me courage," María Pía went on slowly. "But it is one thing, is it not, to be courageous for the sake of love, and another to be valiant in oneself? I am a woman and I have only a little *valor*; so I do not waste it. I do not waste it in running away with a person who despises me!"

"Before God, that is a lie! If I despised, I could never love you."

"*Gracias*," she returned ironically, and fingered the laces at her wrists.

"Let us for once be frank!" he burst out after a short silence.

She blinked; she had the Spaniard's contempt for frankness—the last resource of the losing side. She knew also that there was such a thing as simulated candour—which took in no one but fools. She waited, swinging her foot gently, for the particular brand of candour that Beaufort thought fit to offer her.

"Such a relationship as ours must needs be based on honesty. Worthy as you are to fill the highest station in the land, there are certain prejudices which must, in our northern hemisphere, deprive you of that which, in all qualities of character, you merit. Why deny that this is bitter to you? How lacking would you be in sensibility were you impervious to it!

"It is in my power—and mine only, of the people with whom you are acquainted—to remove some part of the sting, to place you where your gifts may be recognized, to provide you with all the luxury and pleasure to which you are entitled. Such would not be in my power were you my wife; in that case the stigma of your inheritance would attach to us both; I should, in all likelihood, lose my diplomatic standing. It is more than likely"—it was Beaufort's turn to pause, to lick his lips, to steady his heart against its involuntary quickening—"that they will make me an ambassador; as such, my own affairs, and those of my wife, if I had one, would be subject to the closest scrutiny . . . but my private relationships concern no one but myself. As my mistress, I can procure for you the *entrée* in the best society: I can make you envied of all your sex—"

"And you think that I will accept this—patronage?"

"You fool!" whispered Beaufort, losing his head. "Have I not said I love you?"

"If you loved me you would not regard your diplomatic career as of greater importance than my reputation. You would not stand there offering your ware as though you were a pedlar seeking to make a bargain! It is not so that things are arranged in my country, Don Beaufort. Excuse me that I am surprised you are so foolish."

"Do not tell me, señorita"—his face was burning—"that women of quality in your country do not take lovers!"

"Why should I tell you such a thing?" she retorted contemptuously. "My people, men and women, are passionate—as you know nothing of passion in England. When a man wants a woman he snatches her as my father snatched my mother, out of the convent. But first he makes sure that she desires him; he does not attack her, like a *salteador de caminos*, when she is undefended. If we were in Cuba"—she leaned back a little, her head on one side, he felt her ironical appraisal—"you would be lucky to be sitting now, as we are sitting, arguing the matter. My family, señor, would"—she paused for the word, and ended complacently—"would see to you."

His hand came on her wrist.

"Enough of this. Pride is a virtue I admire in women, but, by God, I have had enough of yours! *Eres cuarterona—no?*" He got his first satisfaction in seeing her flinch from the brutality. "Yes, my Havanese eagle, whether you like it or not, a quarter of the blood that flows in your veins is black as pitch, and is enough to damn you in English eyes. Your grandmother was a slave——"

"That is a lie!" As she swung her hand to strike him in the face, Beaufort caught the other wrist, and, twisting them both, brought his face close to hers.

"Do you think I love you the less for it? I, who, from the hour I knew of your heredity, have dreamed of draining Afric's black draught from your lips? That which is poison to others is elixir to me: I am not to be destroyed by it . . . like Lionel, the damned fool, who does not even know what he ventures, in his greensick passion!" "I could kill Lionel," flashed into his mind, "but it would profit us nothing in the end."

"Put Lionel out of your mind," he counselled her, "for he is no good to you, nor you to him. If you marry, it will ruin him, and if you become his mistress, he will soon tire of the difficulties and complications raised by such a union. Although he is of an age to marry, Lionel is still a youth, tied to his mother's apron strings, and in her you have an enemy who will defeat you at every turn. Lionel is soft and sentimental about his home: he will fret if you tear him from it. His is the artistic nature, which kindles quickly to the romantic; but let me tell you this. In all his life there is only one thing to which Lionel has been faithful, and that is to his art."

A fist thumped on the door, and the groom, if he was such, stumbled into the room with a ludicrous expression of alarm and discomfiture on his face. Beaufort dropped her wrists and turned with a deliberation more chilling than guilty haste upon the bewildered man.

"What do you want?"

"There's—there's folks below—a-asking to be let in."

"What folks?" Beaufort snatched the watch from his fob; it was not time for the theatres to be out. In a discreet yard, round the corner, in King Street, waited the coach which was an important part of his provisions. "What folks? I bade you show no lights on the lower floors."

"There an't any lights; 'tis dark as doomsday down the stair. I an't made sound nor sign—same as I was bid——"

A resounding crash cut short the words and echoed from below.

"Lordy, they're a-breaking of the door down!" ended the man in an awed whisper.

Beaufort was out on the landing, leaning across the rail at the stairhead, listening; so far the door had not given. Here was a pretty situation; it offended his sense of the appropriate, its setting he deplored. To be caught pursuing a liaison in a little, common, Bristol lodging-house——! He was too careful, too considered in his actions, so far, to have placed himself in an invidious position.

Could it be that Lionel had returned? That would be the devil, for to deal with Lionel in the way he desired would be to raise a scandal whose echoes would go the length and breadth of England. Infuriated, he realized that he did not even know the geography of the house: whether there was another exit, or a room into which he could thrust the girl while he dealt with the intruders. It could not be the owners who had returned, for they would use the key.

He resolved on boldness; after all, he was almost unknown in Bristol, the darkness and the intonation of his voice made it possible he would be taken for Lionel. Thrusting María Pía aside—she had followed him, catching her cape around her; he saw that she was appalled, but that, under the horror, a wild hope stirred—he crossed the room again, to the window. Before opening the shutters he turned to address her across his shoulder.

"For the sake of your reputation, señorita, you will not betray your presence here!" It was an order, not a question; having given it, he let down the iron bolts of the shutters and leaned out into the misty night. The breeze caught the thin curtains and puffed them inwards, across the candle flames, which the groom stumbled hastily forward to extinguish; there was only firelight in the room, and the man's hard breathing, and the creak of a board, as María Pía stole up behind his back.

But down in the street, to Beaufort's disconcertion, was quite a gathering: there was the night watch's lantern, the fans of light that spread from the lamps of a coach, whose broad roof looked as though it were covered with a huge, pale cobweb, which was the damp congealed upon the polished wood. There were several people, some of whom had obviously no connection with the party, but had gathered to see what was going on, and there was a man who seemed to be a servant, who thumped stolidly on the door, crying out: "Open here! Open here!" a summons that was echoed by the hoarse voice of the night watchman. And a little apart from these, in the shadow of the coach, so that it was hardly visible, there appeared to be a huge, bent figure that supported itself on two sticks, and to whom the others turned for their orders.

"God's blood!" shouted Beaufort. "By what authority do you scoundrels disturb a gentleman's peace?"

There fell an instant silence, and all faces were turned up towards the window, where Beaufort's figure could be now seen, silhouetted dimly against the firelight.

Then a voice piped up, evidently at the bidding of the others.

"Be this the lodging of Mester Lionel Sax?"

"Take pains with your address," curtly rejoined Beaufort. "Lord Lionel lodges here; at the present time his lordship is away."

The figure that had been standing in the shadow of the coach crawled

forward, using its sticks, and the lamps illuminated it. Beaufort saw an old giant, dressed in clothes that belonged to his father's youth; he knew in a flash who it was, and cursed the impulse that had taken him to the window. Raising its head, but not its voice, this figure pointed with its stick towards the house.

"If you have any regard for your door, come down, and open."

"Grandfather!"

The cry, coming from behind him, nearly shot Beaufort out of his skin; its vibrant echo must resound half-way up the town! Smothering a curse, he flung round to intercept her, but María Pía was across the room in a flash, her heels were clattering on the stairs as she leapt from flight to flight. Hampered by the darkness, his head still swimmy from his recent illness, Beaufort attempted to overtake her. Her nails were broken, and her brow streaming with sweat, but she had dragged back the bolts when his hand was on her shoulder. . . .

II

"I've heard a considerable deal of you and your family; I had the honour of your mother's acquaintance long before you were born, and for your grandfather I had a regard which might, under more auspicious circumstances, have ripened into affection. You have fine stock on your mother's side, and you can thank your father's for an honourable name. How come you to be such an unconscionable reprobate?"

"If, sir," sneered Beaufort, "this is to degenerate into a mere vulgar calling of names——"

"It will be more than that," promised Matthew in a voice of almost terrible mildness. "The dishonour of a Flood is not settled by a calling of names!"

There came a faint gasp, which both men ignored, out of the shadows beyond the candles' beam; the room was a little old parlour, black-panelled with age, against whose door Joseph, by Matthew's command, was leaning. The place smelt faintly of apples and mice; it offended Beaufort's sensibilities. The keynote of the affair had altered; it had become suddenly as squalid as the attempted rape of a housemaid—and he had one thought only: how to preserve his *amour-propre* through the coming scene.

"Lud!" he said, in a fatigued voice, "if 'tis a matter of a duel!" The insolence spent itself in air.

"I don't duel at my age; and I don't use my sword on vermin."

"An ill-chosen term!" Beaufort was white to the lips. "I shall be obliged, sir, if you will withdraw it. It—it is hardly seemly," he stuttered, under Matthew's dull stare, "between gentlemen."

Resting his chin on the handle of his stick, Matthew grinned.

"Though my mother was as good as yours, I don't suffer from the disadvantage of being, according to your lights, a gentleman! I have been, in my time, many things, including a slave: but that—no. I do not even lay claim to being an honest man; but it seems I may be on the way to undoing some of my dishonesties. I regret them the less in that they equip me for dealing with things of your calibre! What, sir, have you been doing with my granddaughter?"

"I should have thought," said Beaufort meanly, "that she was the proper

person to ask. If you were a gentleman, sir, you would know better than expect an answer involving a lady's honour!"

The silence that followed was terminated by Matthew's snapping his fingers as to a dog. He turned his head and shot his question into the shadows.

"*Estas deshonrada?*"

"*Yo?*" It was as though she doubted the evidence of her ears. "*Por eso? Estas loco, abuelo mio?*"

Matthew's smile, twisted by the distortion of the cheekbone, was grim in the half-light.

"I know my own blood; our women do not traffic with your kind."

"It is not for me," snapped Beaufort, "to give the lie to a woman."

Matthew nodded.

"You are right. It is not. Not, at all events, when the woman is my granddaughter. If I were younger," he went on conversationally, "I might shoot you; which would be a foolish thing to do, involving me, most likely, in unpleasant consequences. Besides, since those days, I've learned a reverence for death. Who am I, that I should usher you where you are not invited? There's a ceremony about going to hell, as there is in other places; perhaps you have considered that? It's a reflection that may profit you one day."

Beaufort bowed frigidly; he had had enough of this evil-smelling parlour, redolent of its low-class occupation, of the sneers of this old commercial. He sought only a dignified exit—and this, as will presently appear, was to be denied him.

"It happens," continued Matthew, "that I am informed of your line of reasoning. Certain circumstances of my granddaughter's history absolve you, in your own opinion—eh?—of the courtesies you owe to your own country-women?"

"You do me an injustice!" hotly returned Beaufort. "Miss de Lorcha owes me much, as she herself has been pleased, on many past occasions, to acknowledge."

"The señorita de Lorcha y Flood," said Matthew heavily—and again came the breath out of darkness—"admits her obligations, whose acquittal rests with her family."

"I do not speak of material debts," muttered Beaufort; this was downright offensive—this low, bargaining conversation with an inferior! "I hope Miss de Lorcha will dismiss those from her mind; and since we have nothing to gain by prolonging a discussion that gives pleasure to neither——"

"You're wrong," said Matthew. "It gives me both pleasure and satisfaction to tell you that you're a scoundrel."

Beaufort bowed icily.

"And now—I pray your leave to take my departure."

"Whither?" asked Matthew surprisingly. Beaufort raised his eyebrows.

"That, sir, can hardly concern you!"

"You're wrong again. Can you swim?"

Beaufort's pupils dwindled to pinpoints; was he dealing with a madman?

"I grant you it isn't weather for swimming; nor can our muddy river tempt the swimmer like the crystal waters of the southern isles! But the river seems to me an appropriate place, since it is where the town puts its garbage! Into it our fishwives throw the guts of the fish they sell along the quays; our sewage

drains into it. I don't envy you your swim!—though no doubt you've got plenty of pomades and perfumes to take the stink out of your nostrils after you clamber ashore——!"

"By God!" screamed Beaufort. "I'll have the law on you!"

"What have I to fear from the law?" sneered Matthew, and rapped with his stick on the floor. The eager, vinous face of Pallas's coachman poked itself round the door-post; Matthew nodded, and he squeezed through, puffing and panting, with steam rising from the triple capes of his overcoat. "I'm too old to fear the law; nor, I think, would the law come too hard on a person for defending his granddaughter's virtue! For you, it's another matter—eh? No doubt Bristol tongues are lively, and the tale 'ull be all over the town by to-morrow morning; but we have plenty here to occupy our interests, and it 'ull all have died down in a day or two. If it pleases you to take it to court, it 'ull be another story. What sort of a figure will you cut—eh, you popinjay?—when word reaches London of his fine lordship taking a bath in Bristol Avon? Try it! I know enough of society, and enough, perhaps, of you, to forecast the effects of so ripe a piece of scandal in London drawing-rooms!" He beckoned to Joseph. "Put this man in the river."

Joseph's eyes rolled like brandy balls in his black face.

"Suh—suh! Dis am Miss Pally's nevvie! Dis am de lawd Beaufort Sax!"

"Put him in the river," said Matthew, very quietly.

The two servants exchanged glances; neither was in Matthew's pay, and the name of Sax stood for as much as that of Flood. While they hesitated, while Beaufort stood with fists clenched and every muscle taut, longing, yet unable to bring himself to the indignity of flight, cursing the oversight that had made him leave his sword upstairs, Matthew's stick, cracking across the negro's pate, brought indecision to an end.

"Keep off or I'll have you jailed!" muttered Beaufort as they advanced uncertainly on their victim.

"Jail will be paradise"—Matthew laughed dryly—"to what they may expect unless they do my bidding. I'm glad I have a nigger to handle you, Sax! I'd dislike to soil my own hands."

"If your black lays a finger on me——!"

"Don't bluster." It was nearly a whisper. "Black blood is good enough to bed with, isn't it? You see this nigger is well trained; he has been bred to look on the whites as a ruling people: he is uneasy because that which I bid him do is a contradiction of all his training. He has lost, God help him, the pride of his inheritance! Shall I give it back to him? Shall I give him the *reason* of what he is doing? Shall I prove to you that blood—black blood—is thicker than water——?" As Beaufort remained stubbornly silent, Matthew again flicked Joseph's buttocks with his stick. "Be off," he said, adding laconically, "and see that his lordship does not drown."

Beaufort could not believe it; even as they forced him out into the street, and through a gaping and sniggering gathering of Bristolians, he could not believe it. It was simply the kind of thing that did not happen to a Sax, to a figure distinguished in diplomatic circles, to a *habitué* of courts. When he found himself toppling over the edge of the quay, when Avon water rose bubbling to his lips, when slimy and loathsome ambiguities bobbed against

his cheeks—he was still not believing it; it was some kind of hideous nightmare, like those he had suffered while getting over his poisoning.

There was a tremendous yelling and to-do upon the quay; an indifferent swimmer, and weakened by his illness, he instinctively struck out away from it. Someone was swearing and clambering into a row-boat; there was a clatter of oars in the rowlocks. The water was racing in the midstream, where the ships patched the black waters with gold from their riding lights. Beaufort started to gasp, his strokes were growing feebler, suddenly cramp took him in the stomach.

He was alive when they got him out; there were at least a dozen witnesses to it.

She told herself: "I am behaving exactly like Tía Lucía, whom I so despised!" but could not control her noisy weeping. She heard the tap of the sticks, and her grandfather's shuffling approach, and felt him above her; when he ordered her to lift her head, she shook it, smiting the palms of her hands upon her thighs with a movement of which she was unconscious, and which made Matthew catch his breath. Before she knew what she was doing, he slapped her across the face. She gave a little scream, of astonishment, not of pain.

"It was so I did to your grandmother when she forgot the lessons I taught her! I have raised one woman from the savage; I am not minded to do it twice."

"Why did you come? If you had not followed me, I should have been out of the way—for good!"

He lifted one of the candles to look at her face, and set it down again before replying.

"Did you hear what I called you?"

Her eyes mutely questioned him.

"I called you María Pía de Lorcha y Flood." His hand was on her shoulder; at first she stiffened, but gradually, as the fingers tightened, as they seemed to take possession of the rounded bone, she grew limp; no one had ever touched her like that before. She felt something let go, against her will she was relaxing. "That does not sound, does it, as if I wished you out of the way?" The fingers bit in more deeply; they hurt; she wondered how long she would be able to bear it without crying out—and yet she wanted it to go on. "*Y Flood*. That means something. I will tell you what it means."

She felt the blood stinging back into the crushed veins as he moved his hand and sat down in front of her. They were almost knee to knee; in the gusty light of the candles their faces were like one face, and its reflection in a mirror, but neither gave heed to that.

"It means—that you will not again behave as you have behaved to-night: a way as unworthy of your grandmother's people as it is of my own. It means that you will not suffer patronage, and that the name of Flood will protect you so long as you choose to bear it in addition to your father's. We will talk of this no more to-night." His eye ran down her. "Come; cover yourself. It means something else: that you will not in future prank yourself in garments unseemly to your sex! I see I shall have to teach you what is becoming to the name of Flood." But there was more amusement than admonition in his voice, and María Pía took courage; she felt again that strange tug of the

blood, of which, for an instant, she had been conscious, in her first encounter with her grandfather, and the sound of the name he had given her for the first time sent an irresistible thrill through her pulses. She felt, in fact, all the excitement and tremulous distrust of the homeless dog, to whom a stranger makes overtures of friendship. She who for so long had known herself unwanted and disowned dared not accept outright this ownership which extended itself to her; besides—there was Lionel.

"Come home," he was saying.

"No—no. I must stay here." She looked about her wildly. "I must wait—for someone. Señor"—she dropped a pitiful curtsey—"I am grateful for all your kindness! I am sorry to cause you all this inconvenience! I am deeply aware of your goodness." The outward movement of her hands told him she was beaten; it was then he knew that no mere duty bound him to her; that it was possible to love her. Looking at her kindly, Matthew said:

"You may speak in Spanish, if you will. It is long since I heard it, but—I think I shall not forget."

Their eyes met; with a little cry she tossed herself into his arms.

III

It was not until the next day they talked about present matters. They sat in Hercules' office, which was like an oven from the blazing logs; even the heat seemed to make a difference; it had never been hot, like that, at Triton, since her arrival; hot, with a smell of tobacco and wine, and flashes of red firelight from glass and polished surfaces—like it was in Santiago's room, during the wet weather. She had risen late—much later than at St. Michael's; and it seemed to be taken for granted. She was sensually satisfied—and satisfaction went deeper still: for this old man who sat opposite to her was no longer a stranger. In some way it had all poured itself out: María Cayetuña, Buonaventura, the disastrous second marriage, the still more disastrous visit to Spain—liberated by the use of her own tongue, she had told him, not all, for that, she thought, would have taken a lifetime; not even all the important things—for she had ceased to have perspective on that past which seemed so infinitely far away. It was a jumble of the ranch and the plantation, of Santiago's cattle and her childish efforts to fight the bulls, of the orange and lemon groves, of the hacienda and the old, slatternly homestead of Buonaventura; of Tío Miguel's death, of the mirador—flung together with no sense of order or chronology; he had not understood it all, she knew, but the will to understand was there. "You have been there—you have seen Cuba!" she kept on insisting, as though it were a miracle.

He listened, and nodded; and sometimes he followed what she was saying, and sometimes his mind was a thousand miles away. And sometimes he felt: "I am too old. . . ."

It was on the third day of their newly established relationship that he told her she could not marry Lionel Sax.

IV

On that day, Lionel, summoned from Bath, stood white-lipped before his father, and heard the news of Beaufort's death. At least, he heard the Paragon version; later, in Bristol, he was to hear the truth, which he and his father were to agree to keep from Orabella all the days of her life.

"Beau dead! I can't believe it—so soon after Perry." His eyes demanded the truth, which Lord Mildenhall gave him, according to his own knowledge.

"He was brought back, soaked to the skin, not knowing any of us. It was, after all, barely forty-eight hours since he was let out of his bed."

"But, Father, what was he *doing* in Bristol?" A feeling of nausea gripped Lionel, he could feel his heart beating in his throat; he had to use all his self-control not to turn round, rush from the room and gallop headlong to assure himself of María Pía's safety.

Lord Mildenhall shrugged his shoulders.

"Which of us ever knew Beaufort's business? The servants knew nothing—or said they knew nothing. No doubt"—his sensitive mouth tightened—"they were well trained."

"But they must know where it happened!" Lionel's nails bit into the palms of his hands. "Papa—for God's sake—don't you understand my horrible anxiety? There can be only one thing that took Beaufort to Bristol——!"

Lord Mildenhall raised his hand.

"Lionel, I understand, and I know what is in your mind now. I have only one thing to say. Yesterday I was shown dispatches which told me that William's regiment was ordered into active service on the 11th of this month."

He tried hard to focus his mind on the new subject; he stammered:

"Is that so? William will be satisfied; he did nothing but grumble on his last leave that they never got a smell of the gunpowder."

Lord Mildenhall was looking at him. The blood rushed to Lionel's head and pounded in his temples as he realized the meaning of that long, deep look.

Peregrine—lost at Aboukir; Perry's little coffin hardly filmed with dust before the Sax vault had to be unsealed to receive Beaufort; and William—on active service. Aurora, mourning her husband and child, and any day, now, Caroline might be called upon to lay aside her gaudy ribbons and deck herself in widow's weeds.

"Papa——!"

Again Lord Mildenhall made his grave and repressive gesture, as though warning his son not to utter the words that were breaking from his lips. While the room swam round Lionel, he walked slowly down the room; his shoulders were bowed, and his step the step of an old man. With his hand on the door, he turned.

"I think . . . you will not fail us."

CHAPTER XIX

I

TWELVE months after the events chronicled in our previous chapter, on a certain Sunday in October, the stage coach from Bath lumbered into Bristol with astonishing tidings. They should have been brought by the mail, but Bath, first recipient of the news, was giving expression to its elation by unharnessing the ten horses which, on this auspicious occasion, had drawn the mail coach, and insisted on dragging the vehicle as far as Tiverton. Peace had been signed at Amiens; the wars with France were over.

Bristol went crazy. All respectable citizens were in church; through the droning of collects, the mumbling of litanies, the solemn humdrum of sermons, the noise without penetrated gradually the consciousness of the worshippers. The little Red Maids pinched each other, nodded, and exchanged round-eyed stares of conjecture; the ushers' canes prodded and whacked along the tiers of the galleries, where small boys shuffled, wriggled and risked breaking their necks for a glimpse out of the windows. Presently the unrest spread to the adult parts of the congregation, who, so far, had contented themselves with frowns directed, not only at their obstreperous juniors, but at those whose business it was supposed to be to restrain them. The widow Cruikshank had gone even further; she came right out of her pew to box the ears of one excited orphan, who, quite regardless of propriety, was bobbing up and down in his seat, beating his dirty little palms together and chanting in a heady triumph: "It's the 'vasion! It's the 'vasion! It's the 'vasion!" Perhaps he saw the ending of his own little prison life in the landing of the enemy.

The spoiled Fripp boy was thumping his father's knee and kicking his ankles, demanding to know what it was all about: while the two befeathered little girls buried their heads in their mother's bosom and burst into nervous howling. Every one turned towards the Sheriff's pew; there was a great agitation of bonnets and thrusting of sharp feminine elbows into masculine ribs: while outside the sanctified walls the wave of turbulence gathered, swelled and broke in shouts whose purport was not immediately audible to those within. When the noise was at its height, several gentlemen, among whom were the Mayor and the Master of the Merchant Adventurers, rose and left the church. The preacher halted, pouting, red-faced; a stranger to the city, he had heard much of Bristol's barbarous ways, but this—this brawling on the Lord's Day, and outside the very House of God, it was an outrage!

Now there was a buzz of chatter within the church itself: people were actually standing up, tiptoeing to speak across the wooden barriers to their neighbours in the great box pews; a few nervous parties were looking apprehensively at the windows, as though anticipating missiles, and one or two self-important people hurried down the aisle to the church-wardens' stalls, where a great deal of whispering took place, while the horrified verger shuffled up and down, rapping on the doors with his staff and crying "Hush!

Hush!" in a voice that betrayed his sense of unseemliness of this unprecedented scene.

The return of the Mayor dragged every head towards the main doorway as though they had been pulled by a string; every person in the congregation was on his feet, but the shuffling and rustling stopped, and women's hands went to their hearts. Joseph Edye's face was crimson; he shot a glance of apology at the pulpit as he stammered: "It is peace!"

Then, with a rush, a smothered cry, they were all out of doors; a few remained, mindful of their God, to thank Him on their knees; but out there, under the cloud-dappled blue sky, people were shaking hands, kissing each other, laughing, crying—traditional enemies stood shoulder to shoulder, smiling into each other's eyes; mothers and daughters-in-law clasped each other in their arms, forgetful of past differences, youngsters who knew nothing of war, save that it was a game to play at, caught ebullience from their elders, caught each other's hands and pranced up and down on grave-stones, unreprimated for their act of sacrilege. Faces streamed with tears, flashed with smiles. A flame of new life ran through them all; under the mourning that eight out of ten were wearing, hearts beat more strongly and hope revived. . . . Bristol will be itself again! The lovely, foolish hope took hold of each one, and shook him; every man was a brother, sharing the optimism of the future—optimism that an hour or two would dispel, yet which must leave its gleam of glory behind. Well-dressed, honest burghers smiled with loving kindness upon the rabble as it swept by.

"Who's this in the gig?"

"It's Weeks of the Bush—hoozay!" And an outburst of cheering and laughter followed the honest Weeks, who, accompanied by some bright spirit who had possessed himself of a trumpet, went clattering hell for leather towards the Old Market, leaving the echoes of fanfare in his wake. Further cheers greeted the appearance of the cavalry, and, as though inspired by their martial spectacle, Bristol streamed forth, streamed out along the road to Bath. How many Sunday dinners were forgotten, joints roasted to a cinder, ovens burnt out and kitchens blackened with smoke, history does not relate; nor how many throats were parched with dust and hoarse with shouting, by the time the mail coach arrived, with its escort, before the steps of the Town Hall.

Pallas Burmester lifted her bowed head from her hands: it felt a little swimmy. And her knees—how stiff and weak they seemed! Perhaps she had better give up kneeling down in church; it was difficult and undignified—that scramble, with Pilgrim's help, to rise. But to-day a hand hooked itself under her elbow; she felt herself hoisted, found her face on a level with her companion's. They stood for a moment, looking into each other's eyes: Pallas aware that her sight was no longer as clear as it used to be, and Matthew crinkling the lids over eyes that were very nearly blind. They were alone in the church; through the open doors came in gusts the deep, even babble from the churchyard; Pallas's grey-green silk was patched with blue and crimson from the windows.

"I can hardly believe it. I'd given up hoping for peace in our time."

"I wonder," he murmured, as he groped for the stick which she found and put into his hand, "what use we shall make of it."

"There's a new world to be built in this town alone. And now, thank God, we should be able to get our hearing in the Government; there can be no further excuse for shuffling our cause aside. . . . Matthew, it looks as if we shall get Abolition before America after all!" She opened the door of the pew and stepped out carefully into the aisle; Matthew followed her, tapping ahead of him with the sticks; she knew better than offer to guide him. When he felt the smooth breadth of the paving under foot, he transferred both sticks to his left hand, felt for her arm and drew it through his. They walked slowly, peacefully, with a feeling of spiritual unity that went far beyond sentiment; they were like an old, happily married couple, leisurely descending the hill that ended in one of those niches in which, beneath its carved canopy, rested its effigies, male and female, of those who lay beneath; four feet upon a carved hound, four hands placed palm to palm in eternal prayer, stiff stone fluting of garments, formalization of features into something that was a symbol, rather than a likeness. She felt Matthew halt; his left hand lifted the sticks and pointed.

"I once spoke of a thing like that for you and me."

"Yes; I remember."

"Is it too late to talk of marriage, Pallas?"

She waited a little before replying; not that the question took her by surprise, she had felt its imminence for some time.

"Not too late, my dear," she answered gently. "Perhaps a little too early! I have been waiting for you to ask me—yes; why should I deny it? But I have not yet found my reply. I am not satisfied in my own mind as to whether it would be seemly, at my age, to enter into wedlock, or whether—if you want to know the truth—I am a fit woman for you to wed!"

"Leave that to me," he advised her. She shook her head, smiling.

"There you are, you see! A woman who has lived a life of her own for more than sixty years doesn't easily leave things to anybody. I fear neither my will nor my obstinacy have diminished since you went away, Matthew; I have had to do so much fighting, that I'm afraid some people might call me an unsexed woman; at any rate, I am totally lacking in the sweet docility which, I am old-fashioned enough still to be persuaded, makes for peace and satisfaction in the conjugal relation."

"What do I want with sweetness and docility?" he answered roughly. "Those qualities demand a certain setting, which it is not in my power to give you. Get on with your fighting!—only this time, I shall be by your side."

"Yes; would that strengthen or weaken me?" She seemed to be musing aloud. "Not a little of the sympathy and the support I have gained has been due to my solitary condition; because I'm unmarried, I've been free to give everything that's in me to the various causes I've espoused. What husband worth the name would have put up with a wife always gallivanting off to meetings, always poking around on business apart from her domestic duties, always at loggerheads with some public authority? You see, I may be old-maidish, but I am not wholly unreasonable! I would never expect you to put up with such a state of affairs. And the question is, how far should I be justified in adding another overwhelming duty to those I have already assumed?"

"You are talking like a fool, Pally Burmester." But he said it gently.

"Indeed, if we were both of us in our twenties you could hardly talk more foolishly than you do, when you try to make out that our marriage would interfere with the life you have made for yourself during the past years. What are we?—a couple of amorists, trying to cull the roses of passion before it's too late?" He had planted himself in front of her, and she wondered if it was by chance that they had halted just under the long mural tablets that chronicled the history of his house. For a moment her mind skipped back to a little mouldy summer-house, with a dead fire and bats hanging to its eaves; where Matthew first asked her to marry him. And now—in the Redcliff! "I will not say," he was continuing, "that I am indifferent to your body: for that would be a lie. The truth—which may astonish you as it astonishes me—the truth is that, in this which was once a whole man, remains the capacity for being a lover."

The violence of her physical response to this took her aback; it was not conceivable, she felt, at once angry and horrified at herself, that a woman in the seventh decade of her life—a woman who had lived in virtue, as a virgin—could feel that tumultuous leaping of the blood that his words called forth. She relived, in a flash, all those agonies of frustration that had tortured her immediately after their separation: longed for him to touch her—and recoiled before its possibility; felt herself go hard, then melted, and stiffened again—thankful for the heavy silk that concealed her trembling. She was not afraid of giving anything away by her expression: experience had taught her control of her features—although she knew it was sometimes prudent to lower her eyelids, lest anger, resentment or contempt for someone's ill-doings should speak too clearly in her unshuttered gaze. But she was glad that she had previously withdrawn her hand from Matthew's arm; her hand at least was safe, was her own, as it bit into the leather covers of her Bible and hymnal!

"But is this all of it?" Matthew went on. "Have you and I nothing to think of beyond stroking, and holding, and making ease for one another? You know we have! There isn't much ease in the future I envisage, Pally! It may be we shall not even have much time together, until we've won our battle: for your place is here, in Bristol, whereas mine will be wherever there is doubt, or indifference, or sluggishness in the prosecution of our cause. My word will hold authority, because I can talk as one who has been a slave; I can force folks to listen—folks who have become bored by the talk of the ordinary Abolitionist. This business has been hanging about too long; we must thrust it forward, you and I. I need your strength and you——"

"But it is yours already!" she interrupted him. "Matthew, I truly don't see what we have to gain, either of us, by marriage just now. It might even be an unwise step, and evoke adverse feeling, at a moment when it's imperative we should secure every bit of possible sympathy——"

"Since when did you consider public opinion?" he mocked her.

"For myself—never! But I could never forgive myself if, by any thoughtless surrender to—to personal desire, I were to damage the work to which I have given my life."

"How should that be?"

She frowned at his masculine obtuseness.

"To certain people, the spectacle of an old woman getting married is always

a ridiculous one; even widows have to put up with some bitter criticism—an old maid is everybody's laughing-stock! I don't care for myself: but in this place, where I am so closely connected with the movement that to half the subscribers Pallas Burmester stands for Abolition, and Abolition for Pallas Burmester, it would raise a hurricane! I'd be thought crazy—and the people who thought that way would begin to wonder if there was not something a little crazy about Abolition as well. Don't you understand, Matthew?—it is only a few years since we managed to convince them that slavery was evil. Think what it meant—convincing a people whose majority drew their livelihood either from slaving itself or from the plantations, which many people still say will be impossible to run without forced labour. I can't throw that away."

"Do I ask you to throw anything away? We both stand for the same things, don't we?—and I say that you are wrong to allow the opinions of a few light-minded people to influence you."

"They are not all light-minded," she pleaded. "Mrs. Borlase, the two old Misses Crew—it would shock them terribly that, at a time like this, I could turn aside after my own affairs."

"I say you are wrong," he repeated, "but we will leave it at that. We have not so much energy, either of us, that we can afford to waste it in profitless argument!"

He began to walk on, but a memory flashed across her, and she caught him by the arm.

"Matthew—I should have asked you before: the verger spoke to me of it. Do you want that?"—she pointed to the tablet above his head—"removed?" She had forgotten, until his puzzled look reminded her, that he was nearly blind, and quickly, before he questioned, she read it aloud:

MATTHEW,
grandson of Hercules,
son of James Flood & hys wyf
of this City,
lost with the *Cassiopæia*
off the coast of High Barbary
in the year 1764.

He stood there, resting on the sticks, his head lowered, listening. When she paused, he said:

"Why remove it? It is true; that Matthew Flood is lost." He looked up and grinned. "It is not given to many men to read their own memorial tablet!"

She hesitated, before saying:

"There is something else . . . It was added at Maria's orders."

"What?" he asked sharply.

"Also his wife,
SHEBA,
and his daughter,
MARIA CAYETUNA,
who died in Cuba,
1794."

There was a long silence; a shaft of sun reached from the open door almost to their feet. Nearly as bright as Cuban sunlight, but cooler, cleaner, more delicate. Just for a moment he could smell Havana; he saw the narrow, far-off streets, with their slow-moving population, sloe-eyed, brown-faced with every degree of brown, the clash of noise and colour, the mingling of magnificence with abysmal squalor, the savage strength of the Morro, the dignity of San Ysidro, the barrack-like exterior of Santa Clara, its blooming patios—and a house in the calle Colón. All that. And, slipping through it all, a faint figure, a figure he had never seen, but to which involuntarily he lent the character and lineaments of all the mulatto girls he had ever seen: their delicacy and spurious refinement of youth, their curious, wild elegance of wild things bred in cages. María Cayetuña, the unknown link between yesterday and to-day. . . .

The ferries were hard at work when they came out on the parade, for every one was impatient to get back to the town, every one felt that they were missing something, here on the wrong side of the river, while Bristol went mad across the water. Many people came down to meet the boats, shouting the news which all had already heard, agog to tell the tale of Weeks's gallop and the turning out of the military.

"Let me drive you home?" asked Pallas, as she rose and shook her skirts, crumpled and a little damp from the crossing—a crossing which had not been without its dangers, since the proper boatmen were displaced by enthusiasts, who insisted on commanding the oars, and were spurred by the rollicking chants of their companions into crab-catching performances that drew jeers and shrieks from their unfortunate passengers; even Miss Pallas Burmester found herself splashed from head to foot, as she sat, grimly smiling, up in the bows. Bristol merry was even dearer to her than Bristol sorry; she was obliged to frown, to hold back the tears that rushed to her eyes. How long was it since Bristol had let itself go like this?

Joseph stepped forward beaming, prepared to help Mars' Flood into the coach, but Matthew shook his head.

"Nay, I'd sooner walk through the town."

"The people are very excited—they mean no harm, but they are very rough."

"Hey!" Matthew's black brows rose. "Do you interpret Bristol folk to me?" He laughed, gripped the sticks which the ferryman, intent on earning his tip for what he had not done, had put into his hands, and looked towards the town, as if he longed to be there. She motioned Joseph back to the door of the coach, and, following an impulse, laid her hand on Matthew's arm.

"Matthew—if it will please you—I will wed you the day we have got Abolition!"

He laughed again, and patted her hand gently, as though to humour a self-willed child.

"Don't worry yourself, Pally." It made her feel like a child!—a foolish child, intruding fantasies on a situation that called for the utmost realism. Snubbed, she shrank into herself, while he pointed to a troop of youths and girls who swept by, their arms round each other's waists or necks, shouting and screaming as though at their wits' end to know how to celebrate the lifting of the cloud that had robbed them, so far, of youth's carefree heritage.

"It's the war" (or "It's the end of slaving") had been to them the poor and insufficient excuse for their parents' moping and skimping, for the withholding of a new gown, of a ruffled shirt, for fewer plums in the pudding and the curtailment of all pleasant, harmless junketings—ever since most of them were children; to them the signing of the pact of Amiens was the coming of millennium, as it was to the beggars, to whom the coppers flung, in fine ostentatious generosity, from the apprentices' pockets seemed like the shower of gold. "They're a fine, jolly lot! María Pía would have liked this; she said we were always dull in Bristol."

"Will she be there yet?"

He shook his head.

"Not for several more weeks; perhaps a month—if they have calm weather."

II

In the year 1760, Matthew Flood, ducking his head to escape being brained by, successively, a "Turkish Bashaw," a beehive, an elephant and a Golden Boy, cursed the barbarity of his native town. He cursed the crowds, he cursed the traffic, and he cursed the lack of manners which allowed the rabble thus to interfere with the progress of a gentleman.

So far as the government of the city was concerned, there was little improvement at the beginning of the nineteenth century; the footpaths were so narrow—where they existed—that the passage of a week without serious accident to pedestrians was regarded as matter for public congratulation in the local press; heaps of mortar, ashes and offal, cluttering the roadway, offered rootling ground to the pigs and goats, scavenger dogs and lean, hungry cats that swarmed about the streets, and pails of household slops, slung from upper windows, formed no small part of the dangers of walking in the old part of the town.

Yet, on this day of October, in the year 1801, an old man went slowly along Wine Street and had no cause for complaint; an old man, no longer tall enough to be inconvenienced by the signs that swung, squeaking and clacking, over his head. "I must have shrunk a good six inches," was in his mind, and he tried, having first made sure there was clear space above him, to straighten his shoulders; but the effort was too much, and, in all events, was not worth making. Nor was he jostled or otherwise incommoded by the crowds whose faces he could only dimly see. Bristol was drunk with excitement—would soon be drunk with liquor—but there were certain things that commanded its respect. They were odd things. An alderman, a sheriff in all his panoply of office were known to rouse their utmost ribaldries; there was never lacking some convenient missile—were it rotten potato or cow's guts—with which to take the conceit out of some puffed-up party who seemed, on the face of it, to regard himself better than his fellow-citizen. A swaggering "foreign" blade, showing off his town manners and town modes before the honest Bristolians, was lucky if he escaped with the skirts of his fine coat undefiled—unless he happened to top six feet, to carry his sword loose, and to have black brows like a bar of thunder across eyes that warned most people to mind what they were doing. And, even so, there

were certain light-fingered gentry who would risk hamstringing to pick such a stranger's pockets.

But for an old man on sticks Bristol—even Bristol inebriated with its rejoicing—had nothing but respect. That which he had bitterly envied as a young man had come to Matthew unasked, in his age. Perhaps some of it was superstition: he stood to them for living Legend, for The Man Who Was Dead, and had risen, like Lazarus, from the tomb. But that was only the more ignorant; Bristol had always known, and had prided itself on knowing, where it owed its duty, and there was something in that crooked body, in the old, distorted face and the curious, blind distance of the eyes that told them that here was one of the ruling ones, whom their tradition and their upbringing bade them respect. It was odd that, having lost all desire to rule, this should at last have come to Matthew. They knew he could not see, to recognize, them, yet wrongdoers made pretext to look aside, to spit into a farther gutter; the tougher kind thrust on their fellows to give him way room; the respectable, with conscious integrity, wished him good-day. Matthew Flood, son of James, grandson of Hercules; they were used to pulling their forelocks and curtsying to Floods; but this was more than Flood—this Man Who Was Dead, and who came back with that uncanny knowledge from the other-world!

Matthew was going home. Home? He would have scorned to call it so forty years ago—the neat little old house of four rooms, one on the ground floor, two on the floor above, and an attic under the eaves, that propped itself up between two of its neighbours in a tiny close off Wine Street. It was a typical Bristol house, with uneven, copious tiling that had an air of having been scattered haphazard down the sloping roof; the beams in the timbered façade were so heavy that they seemed to pull the upper stories forward, where they overhung the cobbles in front. The close was clean and decent, free of sewage, and had its own pump, shadowed by a lilac tree whose roots were in the next yard; it was part of some property that Ralph Burmester had left to his elder daughter, so it was in as good condition as any place of its kind in that part of the town.

The sale of the contents of Triton had provided Matthew with this retreat, and when Pallas, after a long struggle, succeeded in persuading the Corporation to rent the Lodge, and enlarge her scheme for the care of the sick, he found himself in a position where Santiago de Lorcha's attitude to the restitution of the money was virtually indifferent to him. Riches had lost their meaning; many things had lost their meaning, but nothing more than the lust of possession for possession's sake, of power for the sake of self-aggrandizement.

The furnishing of the new home had been left to Pallas and Fanny Pilgrim—the latter now Matthew's devoted slave. It was Pallas who first realized the turn her handmaiden's devotion had taken; Fanny would have denied it to the end. She turned red as a turkeycock and gobbled with indignation when Pallas, one night when undressing, spoke her mind.

"Leave you?" Pilgrim paused as though thunderstruck in her task of soaping her mistress's shoulders. "I never heard ought so shameful! And if it had been any one but you, miss, spoke of it, I'd have prayed to the Lord to strike them dead!"

"Get on with your work: do you want to give me a chill? Now, Fanny," said Pallas, stifling a smile, "there's no need for you to say foolish things that later on you'll be ashamed to remember. We all know how fond you are of Mr. Flood, and indeed 'twould be unnatural if it were otherwise, considering all you owe him."

"And what about you? 'Twasn't Mr. Flood that come down into them low slums to look for me," muttered Pilgrim; she could never bear reference to the circumstances in which Pallas had found her.

"And if it had not been for Mr. Flood, I should never have known about you, or about the slums either," said Pallas severely. "Give me my shift and stop talking nonsense. It is evident Mr. Flood is in no state to dispense with the feminine care that you and I, between us, have given him. Since he went back to Triton his progress has been slow; indeed, there are times when I think he is slipping back——"

"'Tisn't to be wondered at! Miss María knows nought about illness."

"She knows as much as you do, and you very well know she has her hands full with Madame Deschamps—plague take you!" snapped Pallas. "Why do you have to bring up other matters when I am in the middle of telling you something? When Mr. Flood goes to the new house, it's evident he will need a housekeeper, since poor old Bowling can do little but open a door now and again, or shine his master's shoes and read him the papers. I've said nothing about it to any one but yourself, but I think, Fanny, that you should go with them and look after them."

Pilgrim's back was turned towards her mistress; her shoulder-blades were flat, strong and hard as board: Pallas saw her stiffen them.

"And, pray, what's to become of you?" she muttered, without turning round.

"Carrie'll look after me. She's been getting tired of the kitchen for a long time, and her cooking's gone off sadly—she admits it herself. But she's clean and tidy, and has a nice hand with the iron—what more, after all, do I want? I'm not a young lady of fashion, with a craze for hairdressings, and for altering my gowns every time I see a new number of *La Belle Assemblée*!"

But she knew persuasion would have been useless, unless the proposition had happened, as it did, to fall in with the secret desire of Pilgrim's heart. She had the annoyance of a fortnight's uncertainty, with the sure knowledge at the back of it that Pilgrim would give in, before the latter arrived, with her tin box and bundle done up in a shawl, to bid farewell, and to launch her parting shot at the mistress she had served for twenty years.

"And maybe, miss, we shan't be apart for so long after all."

"And what, exactly, do you mean by that?"

"If you don't know, miss, it's not my place to tell you."

Pallas did a thing she had never done to a servant in her life; she raised her right hand and dealt Pilgrim a stinging slap on the cheek. Fanny gasped, curtsied and hurried out of the room.

"Impertinent creature!—and how I shall miss her!"

She went angrily to the window, and there was Fanny, poker-backed, walking down the drive, followed by Joseph carrying her boxes. And at the gate the creature had actually the impudence to turn, to look back at the

house, and to give a very satisfied nod, as though quite sure it would not be very long before she was walking back up the drive again with her boxes behind her! And this was before the conversation in St. Mary Redcliff, which has already been recorded.

So the two women, understanding better than any man the comforts demanded by a wrecked constitution, furnished the little Wine Street house with all those pieces which offered most ease to a sick man's body. Most of the Triton stuff was too large to go through the narrow doorway, some pieces had to be taken apart and reassembled in the rooms they were to furnish, much of it came from Hercules' office, and was therefore the sturdiest and plainest of all the Triton furniture. The maps, the sea prints, the volumes of Barbot and Nyendael, Artus and Bosman went with them—and one of Shergill's ship-models, which, many years ago, he had presented to Hercules.

And as for the rest—the sale made a grand sensation, and drew buyers, not only from Bath and the neighbouring towns, but all the way down from London; the rumour of the treasures which, since the seventeenth century, had been in the keeping of an old West Country mercantile family drew every dealer from the Midlands to South Wales. Such a disposal of family relics was almost unknown in those days, when people clung hard by their possessions, would raise loans and mortgages, end up by putting a bullet through their brains and leave the payment of the piper to their heirs and executors, sooner than part with that which tradition and family pride had endeared to them.

A few private buyers secured bargains: even Lady Mildenhall sent her bailiff over to bid for a pair of Carolean cabinets of which Lord Mildenhall had been informed privately, and paid an outrageous price, because she was bidding against Jews; her Grace of Beaufort got some china which is still somewhere among the collections at Badminton, and Lionel was later to acquire from a London dealer—who, one may be sure, made fancy terms—an exquisite little miniature by an unknown Italian artist, which he did not know for many years came from Triton Lodge. But the Jews did best out of the sale, and, after them, Matthew. He learned, a few weeks later, that he had the means of living for what might reasonably be expected to be the remainder of his years.

He had felt no qualms at the scattering of his heritage; there was no one, after him, to mourn that disintegrated glory.

It seemed as though life was assuming some shape, some order, as he walked, under the fleecy October sky, into the little close gold-patined with its fallen lilac leaves: where J. R. Bowling opened the door at the first tap of his sticks on the cobbles, and a luscious scent of midday dinner billowed out on the crisp, autumnal air. For Pilgrim was not to be decoyed by any rumours of foreign peace—of which echoes had penetrated even this retired corner—into the neglect of her household duties.

This little place—his home. From habit, Matthew lowered his head as he stepped cautiously across the threshold. Presently he was sitting before a spotless board, being served by J. R. Bowling—rather slowly and clumsily, for table service is not part of a sailor's work; but what did clumsiness or slowness matter? In both was the knowledge that all time was before them.

"You two—you'd think you'd have everything to talk about!" That

was Pilgrim, mysteriously, femininely irritated by the silence that prevailed between Bowling and his master. And Bowling, in the voice that had never quite regained its distinctness since his stroke:

"Ay—everything. That's for why we an't got no cause to wag our tongues"—an answer as inexplicable to Pilgrim as the devotion she sensed between the two men. She liked J. R. Bowling, she was attached to him by his link with her father, but she was bitterly jealous of an intimacy that excluded her from its close, masculine bond. She had once asked Matthew to tell her all about her father's death, and he had done so, but as though he were telling the story to a stranger. She was in many ways an intelligent woman, but she was a little too stupid to realize that Matthew disliked the encroachment of the past upon the future—the future which, by all the rules of nature, must be so short: into which so much must be crowded.

III

Going home, going home. The very creak of the cordage, the slap of the waves as they hit the blunt bows and curled away along the broad-bellied hull shaped itself to the rhythm of the two words. Kneeling on her bunk, Marfa Pia crossed her arms on the sill of the open port and rested her chin on them. She felt the soft air like warm hands clasped round her temples; thank God it was calm—calm as dark-blue velvet, with a band of phosphorescence along the horizon. Oh, the great, calm emptiness of the sea, the emptiness of the star-spattered heavens!

"I am different; I am not the same. Do I look older?" She did, much. It was, had she known it, a grave and wistful face, a face much older than its years, that was lifted to the stars. The stars, which are supposed to govern people's lives. In all that wild disorder, that prodigality of spattered silver, what design is there? Which among all those myriads is meant to be mine?—and how can it ever sort itself out from among those others? Sometimes a star falls; what does it mean? Suppose it should be mine?

She gave an involuntary shudder, and let herself collapse back on the soles of her feet, where she remained for a little while, limp, staring at the wall. The ship rocked very gently; she had grown almost to like it. It gave her a drugged feeling, it dimmed her senses—like the beginning of a dream.

The pungent stench of lamp-oil was in her nostrils, the light failed suddenly, and she turned her head to see a long plume of black laid up the side of the chimney, with a thin scarlet blade of flame shooting over the top. She muttered, unfolded her cramped limbs and opened the door to call the cabin boy. While the quick patter of his bare feet approached along the deck, she went to the bunk which occupied the opposite side of the cabin to hers and stood looking down with her hands on her hips.

"I'm sorry to disturb you; the lamp stinks."

"I was not asleep."

"Do you want some water?"

"No, thank you, *ma chère*."

The negro boy came in, was told what was wrong, and ran away to fetch another lamp.

"*Madre mia*, but you are like a skeleton!"

"And so would you be, if you had suffered three weeks from *mal de ner!*" The retort was spirited, the voice hardly more than a whisper

And the prison. And the food. And the vile companionship. What pride, or, perhaps, what delicacy, kept her from mentioning those? María Pía clenched her hands.

"Well, you will soon be well in Cuba. It sounds as if I was defying something; what more can there be to defy?"

"That goes without saying. The climate of Cuba is miraculous."

"You would be polite," accused María Pía, "on the steps of the guillotine!"

"I think," whispered Madame Deschamps, "that it would not be very difficult to be polite at the guillotine! After all, there is not much time for anything, and a little politeness harms no one. On the contrary. It is very stimulating to one's *amour propre*, and that, after all, is the only thing of importance."

"It is a bone—with the meat chewed off it."

"But think how strong it is—a bone!"

"And how tasteless!"

"Pardon, *ma chère*; there are few things more delicious than marrow, if one takes the trouble to extract it."

The girl laughed unsteadily.

"Oh, you—with your *idéés fixe*! But if there were nothing else to eat, you would not get much satisfaction out of marrow."

"Indeed I should. I get quite a satisfaction in thinking about it now. It has not been agreeable, these last few weeks," admitted Madame Deschamps, "to think about food; but for some reason I now get the greatest pleasure out of imagining a dish of marrow, with the proper condiments, and a *sauce piquante*—such as I shall be glad to taste again. The English are not intelligent about sauces."

María Pía laughed again; it was typical of their conversations since the setting forth from Bristol—this deliberate triviality, this avoidance of deeper issues. She was silent while the cabin boy brought the new lamp and unhooked the old one; a stronger yellow light bathed the tiny apartment, which seemed brilliant, after its former smoky dimness.

"How long are you going to treat me as if I was a child, Deschamps?"

The Frenchwoman's eyes, looked steadily from their cavernous hollows.

"I have never treated you as though you were a child. But it is always a mistake to enter into discussions before one has had time for deliberation. I would rather, *ma chère*, that you talked to me with your mind than with your heart. The heart is sore; it must rest, it must be given time to heal itself."

"There are wounds that do not heal. . . ."

"That is true," Madame Deschamps answered candidly. "But one becomes used to them; unless they are aggravated, they cease to hurt. Leave your heart alone, my little one; do not finger it."

"Oh, Deschamps, Deschamps! I have said nothing, have I? Nothing since we left England. But when we get home I shall have no one but you to talk to, no one who knows, who understands. What do you think he is

doing now? What is he thinking? To whom is he talking? I know nothing of his life, except that little part that belonged to Bristol—such a little part; I never realized it before. I have nothing by which to measure his present conduct, no means of seeing him when I close my eyes." She closed them as she spoke, and her teeth, sinking into her lower lip, whitened its full curve.

There was a silence before Madame Deschamps spoke.

"You have much to be proud of," she said slowly. "Those who love are apt to forget love's dignities, and those, *ma petite*, you have admirably observed. Do not forget that it was you who relinquished; it was a fine gesture, that—of giving Monsieur Lionel back to his family. It was a gesture you were right to perform, and there are none who would deny your nobility in making it. For none can doubt your love, or the greatness of the sacrifice you made." She knew it was poor comfort to offer to a girl who was still sensitive almost beyond the point of endurance to her loss; but it was part of her principle to offer it. She did so, steadily sending forth her will, with the words, that María Pía might be strengthened. "Have you your father's letter?" she asked gently. "Read it to me again, for I was in so poor a state when last you read it me, I hardly took it all in."

After a moment of hesitation, an almost sullen look of reproach for the other's calmness, María Pía rose and pulled out a drawer of the tiny chest into which they had crammed their belongings; she was so tall that she had to keep her head lowered a little, not to knock it on the timbers overhead, and, as the ship rolled, she braced the back of her knees against the bunk to keep her balance. A variety of things tumbled out of the drawer, among them the little box that had reached her along with Santiago's letter. Involuntarily she swooped, her fingers fastened on it; she held it to her bosom with her left hand, while her right explored the drawer until it met with the crackle of paper, and she drew out the letters.

She knew them by heart—those long, formal phrases in which Santiago disguised his shock and his pain at her act of rebellion; she could have recited them—and they would have meant to her just as little as the recitations she had learned in her childhood. They were a formula—Santiago's formula for the paternity his actions had denied. The heart of the letter did not lie there, but in the final paragraph, over which, although she strove to keep it calm, her voice stumbled, and her heart, her sore heart, quickened its beat:

"And now, my daughter," wrote Santiago, "you will return by the ship that brings this letter. I have sent Señores Molinos a draft that will cover your obligations and the expenses of your journey, and I do not doubt that those to whom you are indebted will have kept count of what is owing. Direct them on my behalf to render clear statement to the lawyers, and make my acknowledgments when you make your own.

"It is now my sad duty to announce to you the death of your grandfather, which took place shortly before your Aunt Lucia returned to the island. This, as you will be able to imagine, has caused many alterations, not the least of which is the removal of my household from the ranch house to Buenaventura. Much work goes on there, and it will be some time before

the place is fit for habitation Your stepmother remains in Havana, which is better adapted for the care of the infant——”

She broke off to laugh harshly.

“It would not be Leonor, would it, unless she found an excuse to do what she wanted? Much use she would be to Buonaventura. Papa is wise; if he forced her, she would make him pay for it.”

“——while I spend much time at the old house, superintending the labour and planning for our new dependents, whom I find of good disposition, but an idle, undisciplined lot of whom not much use is to be made. I am rebuilding the bohios; the quarters extend over nearly an acre more ground than they did when you went away.”

(“Do you remember my suggesting that to him?” Madame Deschamps’s quick ear caught the unconscious note of pleasure in her voice.)

“The ranch house stands empty; I have left Adan in charge, since he is a person of confidence, and respected by both field and indoor hands. He will rejoin me later, and meanwhile his place is taken by a young son of Chipre, who manages not ill. The place is kept well in order; it is for you to make such changes as please you on your return. Carlos Rodríguez charges me with messages of regard to you. . . .”

She did not know her voice had trailed away, that her hands, holding the letter, had sunk on her lap. She was seeing the low house with its terrace, the orangery, the myrtle-bordered parterres, the little formal lake, the mirador. . . . The mirador!

Her fingers groped for the box, found its little latch of tarnished silver, and touched the velvet lining. First tentatively, then with a sudden strength, they fastened upon its contents and drew them out. Two keys; one, she knew, was the key of the mirador, which she had given Santiago on parting; the other she knew, although she never remembered seeing it before; its size, its shape communicated themselves to her intelligence as the key of the Villa. It was Santiago’s way of giving back her home to her!

For the first time since they sailed the tears welled to her eyes and bathed her cheeks. Madame Deschamps, after one long look, turned her face to the wall. Going home—to the Villa, to the mirador, to María Cayetúña’s shadowy, loving arms.

●

EPILOGUE

ON the twenty-sixth of March, in the year 1807, an old lady of Bristol looked round her sitting-room, and seemed to be seeing it for the first time. She had known it all her life—known it intimately; its little alcoves, its broad bow windows, its tapestries and hangings; she had known its smell—that charming, mingled masculine-and-feminine scent of leather, potpourri, powder, fire-wood, dried orange and clove, all blended together with faint traces of the exotic perfumes that now and again found their way to Bristol. The pictures on its walls were so absorbed into her consciousness that she had almost forgotten their subjects—except the Zoffany of Lydia, which Ralph had had painted, with true Bristol acumen, in 1759, just before the Royal patronage boosted the painter's credit—and his prices—sky-high. To this, instinctively, she found herself turning each time she entered the room, as she would have turned to the original, had she been there; it gave Pallas a shock, sometimes, to reflect that she was now older than Lydia had been when she died.

And now, for the first time since that sad day, she found herself with time to look, to see, to appreciate the inherited beauty with which she was surrounded. It was like greeting old friends, unmet for years; she felt in her heart a small, warm, childish pleasure that her glass was still glittering, her china fresh and bright, her silver and pewter shining, and all the layers of amber-colour, of chestnut, of dark sherry and inky-brown glowing through the polish on her furniture, as they had done when Lydia's house-proud delight was to look after them. "No thanks to me," thought Pallas, "that it is so."

"I must have very good servants," she observed, more to herself than to her companion.

"A good mistress makes good servants."

"My dear!" She turned, her face breaking into wrinkles with her charming smile. "How sententious of you!" She laughed, to take the sound of reproach from the words. "Besides, I'm not a good mistress; I've almost left my house to take care of itself, since—since——" Suddenly her hand shot out, and rested warmly on Mildenhall's. "My dear boy, I forgot; I owe you so much thanks. It was indeed thoughtful of you to send that special messenger, as soon as the Royal signature was obtained. What it is to have a nephew at court!"

"I could do not less; you know I would do anything for you." But the sweet, rather melancholy face was relaxed into a look of pleasure. "It was, after all, only a matter of giving an instruction——"

"You have plenty to think about, without troubling yourself over my affairs."

"It is more than worth while, to see your face to-day. Aunt Pallas, do you know you look at least twenty years younger? Upon my soul, if it were not within the prohibited degrees, I would propose to you myself. What a confusion that would make—I mean, if you accepted me: your own sister would be your mother-in-law! But tell me." It was evident, for all his gallantry, that Lionel was forcing his merriment; that light, brittle sparkle hurt her, more than his habitual sadness. She knew he was doing it only for her. "Is it true that you once refused twenty proposals in a week?"

"I suppose that is one of Orabella's inventions." She shook her head. "Lionel—Lionel—can you wonder I feel light-hearted to-day? Can't you imagine what it means to see all that you have worked and struggled for brought to fruition? 'No vessel shall clear out for slaves from any port in the British dominions after the first of May, 1807, and no slaves be landed in the colonies after the 8th of March, 1808.'" There was a curious soft ring of ecstasy in her voice as she recited the terms of the Bill which had been passed through both Houses, and had received the Royal assent the previous day. "It's what I've dreamed of, what I've lived for, since I was a girl."

"And," said Lionel quietly, "there's a grand frenzy among plantation owners and talks already of demanding Government compensation."

"Let them demand!" she cried and lifted her clenched hands like a child; lifted them as though the freedom of every slave all the world over was there, clasped within the soft, withered palms. "And let us be generous—let us give them all the compensation they need; for we can afford it, now we've regained our self-respect as a nation!"

"I wonder what effect it will have on the other colonies . . . the French, the Portuguese, the—Spanish." She heard the almost imperceptible break before the last word.

She looked him straight in the face as she replied:

"Yes . . . I heard from her last week."

The colour went up his face in a flame; he turned aside sharply. It was some seconds before he controlled his voice to mutter:

"Is she—happy?"

"Very, I think," said Pallas briskly. On that score María Pía's letter left no doubt, and it was well he should know it. "Her first son was born last October, and she writes of him proudly as the future owner of the de Lorcha ranch! and also, I'm afraid, of his prospects of thrashing his uncle, Santiago's eldest boy. Oh, my dear, it is good to read her letter! Are you not glad it has all turned out so well for her?"

"Of course I am glad," he muttered. "But I wonder—sometimes—if God will ever forgive me."

"You have had many signs of His forgiveness," she said meaningly. "Haven't five years shown you the blessedness of His ways? She is among her own people, who know, love and understand her; you have assumed duties whose neglect would have filled you with eternal compunction if you had disowned them in order selfishly to gratify your own desires. Come, Lionel." She placed her hand firmly on his shoulder. "Do you think we don't hear, even in Bristol, how well things go at Paragon? How manfully you've shouldered responsibilities that were a sore tax—ah, yes, I know it, on your temperament and your ambitions?" She paused, stricken by the unchangeable sorrowfulness of the young face, which seemed each time she saw it to grow more like that of Lionel's father. But she thought: "Edward would be proud if he could see his son to-day."

With a sudden impulse she linked her hands behind her nephew's neck.

"Please, please don't be sad to-day!" she pleaded. "For when you are sad, I like to be sad with you, and to-day—forgive me: I cannot! I cannot!"

"I wonder you have the patience for such an egoist as I," he told her, smiling despite himself at her naïve appeal. "Yes, indeed, I came over to rejoice—to

drink wine with you, if you will offer me a glass! and to bring you a characteristic message from Mama. She said, if you want to know: 'Well, now I suppose Pally feels she was justified in making such an unconscionable nuisance of herself! and tell her, with all my love, that I'm very glad—if only to be spared any more of her demands on my purse!'

"She speaks too soon." Pallas wagged her head in appreciation of this quip. "Wine—yes; I think I will take a glass with you—and, as I've sent Joseph out with a message, perhaps you will be so good as to act as butler for me. The decanters are downstairs—you know the room; and—and perhaps you will bring up three glasses——"

"Three?"

"I am expecting Matthew." She suddenly gave him a little push towards the door. "It is not every woman who has a lord to wait upon her!"

"Upon my soul, Aunt Pallas! I think we should pass a Bill for Abolition every day." He was swept out of his melancholy by the puzzling brightness of her face. "You positively look as if you might dance a jig——!"

"Kindly don't put ideas vastly unbecoming to my age and situation into my head," said Miss Burmester, and swept her astonished nephew a curtsey. She saw his eyes run over her, and was relieved when he went without remarking on that which she saw he had noticed: that she was wearing a gown much paler and gayer than her usual sober choice—a thing she had got for one of the Paragon receptions and worn on no other occasion, of the faintest lavender-grey silken net, over a foundation of dark rose, threaded and knotted with the blue it was fashionable to call "Persian." She was a little self-conscious of it, and wondered if she had been foolish to put it on; but the admiring Carrie had encouraged her . . . Was Carrie perhaps a little flighty? Now, if it had been Pilgrim——

"I sent the letter from the house straight down to Matthew," she said across her glass of wine. "(Is this good? Do you know, Papa's cellar is almost intact, I drink so little myself, and have entertained so little in the last years; but I'm afraid some of white will have deteriorated by now—I must get advice upon it.) I wanted him to read it by himself—before he came to me. There are some things that one should be alone for: great joys—perhaps great sorrows. Just for the first moments, I mean—alone, you know, with God."

"How is he? Last time I saw you, you were distressed about his health."

"He is shockingly weak, but this—I feel—I know—will give him strength." (Was it what she knew, or what she hoped? So honest with herself habitually, Pallas's mind jibbed from this thought.) "Those journeys he took—the people he insisted on seeing—the meetings he would address—were far too great a tax on him; I was very grateful when Mr. Wilberforce forbade him, at Clapham, to continue with his efforts, for he would have listened to no one else. 'It is coming,' he said, 'sooner than we think: not Emancipation—that we shall not see in your lifetime or mine; but we shall have Abolition before two years are out: you may take my word for it.' I am afraid neither Matthew nor I believed him at the time——" She checked herself and held up her hand as Lionel was about to speak. "Did you hear anything? I thought it was the coach"

He went to the window, while she turned involuntarily towards the mirror. For a moment what she saw appalled her: was it possible that this woman—

this *old* woman, with white hair, with eyes deeply netted with wrinkles, with faded skin and hands that hovered with the uncertainty of age about the folds that covered her shrunken bosom—was embarrassed and tremulous at the coming of a man no less aged than she?

The shock was followed by a panic doubt: how could a man, such a man as Matthew Flood, fit into her life now—into her little domestic world, into the close-knit mesh of her accustomed spinsterhood? For sixty-odd years she had been the sole arbiter of her household and her habits; it is a little frightening, when one is old, to have all the structure of one's living broken down, reassembled in a fresh pattern. Have I enough adaptability, generosity, imagination, to take it with good grace?

Her virginal chamber flashed into her mind—that threshold uncrossed save by herself and Pilgrim since Lydia's death; its boards creaking under a man's tread! The delicate reserve of her personal possessions destroyed by a man's hand! Oh—oh—lock the door: let me hide!

Then she pulled herself sternly together. You could act no more foolishly, Pallas Burmester, if you were a schoolroom miss, faced with betrothal to a stranger! Besides . . . had Matthew taken her promise seriously? He had the air of not appearing to do so; he had displayed, in fact, a most disconcerting nonchalance. Perhaps, after all, he was not coming to hold her to her word.

Yet, at that prospect, the brightness faded from her day. Just for a few months, weeks, hours to live hand in hand: to know the sweetness of daily and hourly companionship, after her long, self-chosen loneliness—it was not much to ask. And then—"we'll come to lie, under our marble selves, down in the Redcliff; for I'll share no musty vault with you, my starry queen. . ."

"It is the coach," said Lionel.

A weakness and languor went through her limbs; she felt the flesh sagging. Her hair felt disordered; she looked down with shame at her gay dress. A bedizened old hag. Then pride lifted her head. Her voice, she was glad to hear, was admirably steady, her movement tranquil, as she joined Lionel at the window.

"I hardly thought they would be here so soon."

The old Burmester coach, which had taken Ralph to the works and Lydia shopping, came heavily up the drive. "It's really getting shabby," half of her mind was thinking. "But it will serve out my time." Neither the coachman on his box, nor Joseph, swinging on the strap behind, lifted their heads to look up where she stood in the window; it almost seemed as though they kept their heads deliberately down—the coachman was sitting badly, hunched in his seat. "He would not do that if I were behind him!" flashed irritably through her mind. "I'll speak to him later."

And so it came with what seemed like an unpardonable slowness up to the steps, and stopped, and Joseph got down and opened the door.

"Why, it's Pilgrim!" In her surprise, she rapped sharply on the glass, but Pilgrim did not look up either; she hurried, with her head down, like the others, into the house. Pallas waited for a moment—and then she knew.

She knew before the door opened, and Pilgrim came in, straight up to her mistress, without greeting or curtsy, and took her in her arms. She held her hard against her hard bosom, looking over her head, almost as though Pallas was not there; there was no sort of expression or emotion in her

blemished face, but the roughness of the pock-marked skin seemed more apparent than usual, and it had the greyness, not of human flesh, but of granite. When she spoke it was as though she were finishing some speech she had begun a long time before; perhaps, thought Pallas, with some disassociate part of her mind which was free to notice such trifles, she had begun it on the long drive up from Wine Street.

" . . . so we left him alone to read it. We left him alone for about an hour. Then Bowling went in . . . and the letter was still in his hand."

Lionel, who had stood as though fossilized through these words, moved forward quickly. As though suddenly realizing her place, Pilgrim stepped back, with a half-bob of apology; he saw out of the corner of his eye that she had begun to tremble very much, but his thoughts were for Pallas, whose light, attenuated weight rested against him for a moment before she pushed him gently from her with her hands.

"Now you must not—either of you—be like that!" It was as though, after her momentary weakness, a wave of strength swept through her. The man and woman, looking at her, saw how tall she must have been in her vigorous youth, as she straightened her shoulders and seemed for a moment to tower above them. "He is gone. Why should I mourn, when it can't be long before I follow him? He is gone—at the moment when that for which he came back is accomplished! Why, Lionel—Pilgrim—don't you see what a wonderful thing death is?"

After a moment, Lionel raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. The words she had spoken just a few moments ago came back to his mind: "There are some things one should be alone for; great joy—perhaps great sorrows. Just for the first moments—alone, you know, with God." As he lifted his head he looked at Pilgrim, and she, for once, caught his meaning. The pair of them went from the room.

Pallas walked to the fire and spread out her hands, which were very cold, to the blaze. Presently she lifted her head, and the sweet, smiling Zoffany-Lydia was there, smiling down with that angelic expression which had never been quite maternal, but rather sisterly.

"How kind you were to me, the last time! It was a miracle that any one so happy as you should know how to be so kind."

She felt dazed, as though she were not quite awake.

"I'll share no musty vault—my starry queen!" What, were her eyes wet? "Matthew—Matthew. It's all right, my love: you've earned your rest—while I go on. You can sleep sound!"

THE END

Blewbury, December 31st, 1940.

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